Kuji Furumiya
Illustration by chibi
IV
Unnamed Memory
Once More upon the Blank Page

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Kuji Furumiya
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Unnamed Memory
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IV

The tale of the fifth witch and the king has come to a quiet end. But now, it links to a new story. The next act opens when two people meet: a woman who has emerged from a four-hundred-year-long sleep and a cursed king.
Once more, a great, unnamed story is scribed upon a blank page.

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Unnamed Memory

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Kuji Furumiya

Illustration by chibi

YEN ON

NEW YORK

Copyright

Unnamed Memory
Volume 4
Kuji Furumiya
Translation by Sarah Tangney
Cover art by chibi
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UNNAMED MEMORY Vol. 4 SHIRAKAMI YORI MOU ICHIDO
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First Yen On Edition: December 2021
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Furumiya, Kuji, author. | chibi, illustrator. | Tangney, Sarah, translator.

Title: Unnamed memory / Kuji Furumiya ; illustration by chibi ; translated by Sarah Tangney.
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2020–
Identifiers: LCCN 2020041071 | ISBN 9781975317096 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975317119 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975317140 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975317164 (v. 4 ; trade paperback)
Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Witches—Fiction. | Kings, queens, rulers, etc. —Fiction. | Love—Fiction.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.F976 Un 2020 | DDC 741.5/952—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020041071
ISBNs: 978-1-9753-1716-4 (paperback)
978-1-9753-1717-1 (ebook)
E3-20211029-JV-NF-ORI

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Character Profiles

Farsas

Oscar
Current king of the Kingdom of Farsas. Bearer of the legendary royal sword Akashia, which can neutralize magic.

Lazar
Oscar's childhood friend and a royal attendant. A young man who has been through a lot in the service of his lord.

Als
A general. The most capable person in the military and Oscar's sparring partner.

Kav
A mage. A very inquisitive young man who doesn't shy away from Tinasha.

Sylvia
A mage. A beautiful blond woman who is sweet and kind but a little ditzy.

Doan
A mage. A talented young man who is well-known to be the next in line for the position of royal chief mage.

Tuldarr

Tinasha
A spirit sorcerer who was saved by Oscar as a girl. Slept for many years underneath Tuldarr Castle.

Mila
A mystical spirit who serves Tinasha. A beautiful young woman with crimson hair and eyes.

Calste
The current king of the Magic Empire of Tuldarr. He's quite young for a king and possesses a gentle countenance.

Legis
The prince of Tuldarr and Calste's only son. A young man with light-blond hair.

Renart
Legis's personal court mage from Tayiri.

Others

Travis
The highest-ranking demon. Evidently, he battled Tinasha four hundred years ago…

Delilah
A bewitching woman who visited Oscar. She knows about his curse.

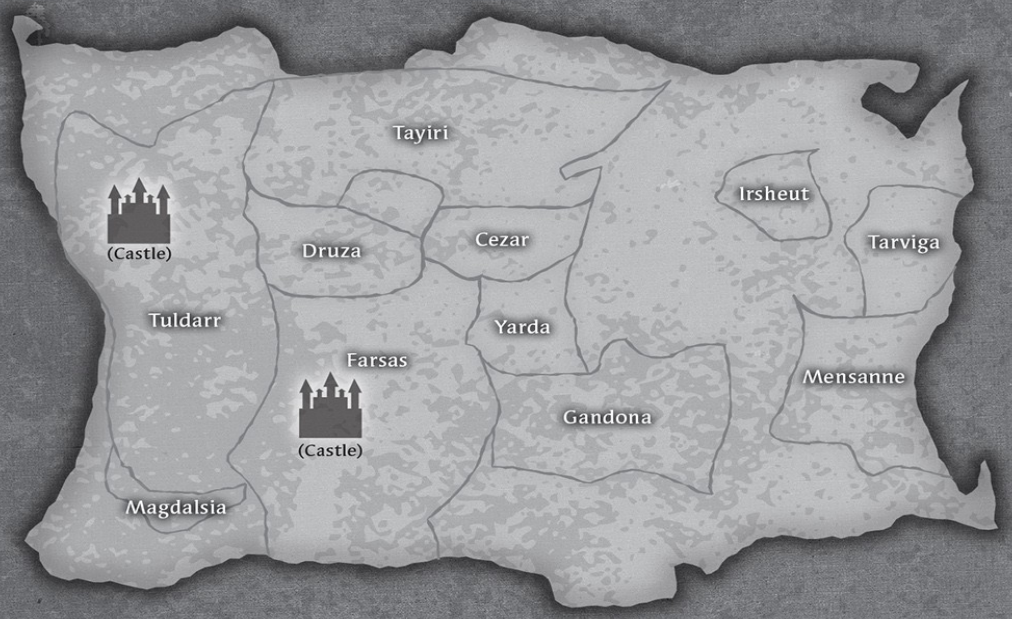
Nephelli
Princess of the eastern country of Yarda. Circumstances have her staying in Farsas.

Gait
Nephelli's personal mage. He is staying in Farsas with her.

Valt
A mage who came as Nephelli's guard. He hides his immense magical power.

The Lands of *Unnamed Memory*

Current Year: 1654 (526 by Farsas historical reckoning)



Once, mages were called fiends and suffered oppression and unhappiness.
A country built by mages changed the fate of all their kind shunned by others.
It was the Magic Empire of Tuldarr.
The protector of mages and deterrer of forbidden curses.
With its twelve mystical spirits, Tuldarr has raised
powerful mages into rulers for generations.
In the nine hundred years since its founding,
this country still stands as the most
mysterious in all the lands.

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1. Silent Song

Blood poured out into a puddle so large it made her wonder how her body could have housed that much liquid.

She was already numb to the pain and couldn't figure it out. She had cast an anesthetizing spell but wasn't certain whether it was still in effect.

As everything grew fuzzy, she tipped her head up.

Moonlight illuminated the horrific scene in the castle courtyard. The garden trees were ripped apart; giant holes dotted the ground. A row of stone pillars had all toppled. One was half smashed to bits, and Tinasha was slumped up against the remaining portion.

It was a disastrous sight, like a vicious storm had swept through. However, the courtyard was entirely silent. That was because a clear victor had emerged, and now Tinasha had to decide what to do with her final moments. She looked down at her flank, which was partially gouged away.

"…Karr… Mila…," she said, calling for her mystical spirits. Yet no one answered. It had been that way for a while. A man had forced all twelve spirits to surrender. Tinasha hoped they were still alive, at the very least. She was their master, and if she died, the twelve would be freed. Maybe they could even escape. That thought was a comfort.

Tinasha took a shuddering breath, smelling blood.

"…Oscar."

Speaking his name out loud brought on a stabbing pain in her heart. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she bit her lip.

Suddenly, someone appeared in front of Tinasha. "Who were you calling for? Do you still have someone coming to save you?" a man questioned with a sneer. This was the very person who had defeated Tinasha and her spirits with his overwhelming power.

His choice to do so had been bereft of motive or reason. Crushing them beneath his heel had sounded fun, so he had.

He was like death personified.

Tinasha gave a weak laugh. "No one is coming to rescue me… The person I called for doesn't exist in this time."

Oscar, who had saved her when she was young, didn't exist anywhere. He had disappeared—the price of his choice to rescue her. In the five years since, Tinasha had governed her country fastidiously…only to come to this frightful end now. The woman was hailed as the strongest queen, but ultimately there was someone even greater than she.

Her lips curled in a self-deprecating smile, and the man gave her a suspicious look. "Doesn't exist in this time? What does that mean?"

"What good would it do to answer you? I was just reminiscing to myself," she said, closing her eyes as she took shallow breaths.

A smile spread across the beautiful inhuman man's face to see her in such a low state. "Tell me. I came here to play with you. We're here together now, so entertain me a little."

She slept.

She kept sleeping. Very, very deeply and dreamlessly.

She heard grass stirring—and the babbling of a little brook.

These parts of the miniature garden remained unchanged no matter how much time passed. They just went on existing, like a secret paradise.

No, not a paradise—a fragment of a fantasy.

A box for her to go on dreaming in, locked up tight and unable to be touched by anyone.

So for now, she was simply in a slumber of nothingness, until the day came for things to start over.

Waiting for a certain someone.

※

It was his first visit to this country. The landscape had a sort of polish he was unfamiliar with.

The white walls of the stores and houses on the streets weren't that extraordinary on their own, but a closer inspection revealed that magical sigils and markings were carved into the facades, doorplates, and signboards. The shop windows facing the street were plated not with glass, but with thin, filmy water. Curious, he reached out to touch one and stared as his fingers slipped right through it. "It really is water. How interesting."

"In this country, it's cheaper to use magic implements that can put up water films than see-through glass," explained the male mage accompanying him, grimacing as the young man shook his wet fingers dry.

The young man craned his neck to look all around. "Tuldarr, the nation of magic…"

The people going about the main thoroughfare were wearing clothes that one could've found on display in any neighboring country. However, for every ten citizens, there was one sporting a robe made of magical material characteristic of this land. If all who donned such garments truly were mages, that meant Tuldarr was home to far more mages than any other nation.

The young man was full of rapt curiosity. Behind him trudged his attendant, a childhood friend. Unlike the high-spirited young man, this fellow appeared downcast and despondent. “I don’t feel good about this, Your Highness…”

“What’s wrong? And you know I don’t like being called that.”

“Don’t speak of such trifling things now,” grumbled the worn-out attendant. The young man turned around to give his companion an exasperated look.

At twenty-one, he was the crown prince of the Great Nation of Farsas. His well-proportioned, tall physique and gorgeous looks drew attention naturally; the people passing by on the road had been looking back to sneak glances for a while now.

Cool and composed, the prince replied, “You insisted that we not travel to where the witch lives, so we came here instead. Could you try acting a little less dour?”

“Yes, I did say that! But why did you carry Akashia with you? What will happen if someone interprets it as a sign of hostility?”

“I just wanted to have it. To be on the safe side,” the prince replied flatly.

His attendant hung his head, dejected, and a mage clapped him on the shoulder. “Give up, Lazar. We’re already here.”

“I don’t know how this happened…,” whined Lazar. Then he looked up and beheld a royal palace constructed of alabaster stone.

They were in Tuldarr, the country known as the Magic Empire that boasted to possess superior technology and power.

To disguise his royal status, the prince was dressed simply in a lightweight outfit. He patted his chest. “It’s all right. We’ve got the letter of introduction I had my father write.”

“You should have said as much sooner! I thought we were barging in entirely unannounced!” cried Lazar.

“Well, we are. I only decided to come here yesterday,” admitted the prince.

Lazar twitched. “We should have at least made an advance appointment!”

Ignoring the two friends who were caught up in their usual back-and-forth, the mage who was traveling with them headed for the castle gate and addressed a guard there. After a while, they seemed to reach an agreement, and he turned back. “Your Highness, we’ve been granted permission. Let’s go in.”

“Thanks, Doan,” said the prince.

“I do have a bit of influence here…,” replied Doan, who had studied abroad in the Tuldarr royal palace to learn magic. Although that was two years ago, he still knew many here, which was why he was chosen to come along.

After bowing to his lord, Doan took his place behind him. His eyes on the prince, he murmured in a low voice, “I do hope this helps one way or another…”

Doan recalled the story of the prince’s curse he’d heard on the journey here. A frightful hex had been placed on the prince by a witch.

“Cursed never to sire an heir.”

The prince was an only child, and the foul magic ensorcelling him doomed any woman who became pregnant with his child to die before giving birth. As if that wasn’t bad enough, widespread child abductions had struck Farsas fifteen years ago, leaving the kingdom with no other direct heirs in the royal lineage. To leave the curse unbroken was tantamount to accepting the extinction of the royal line.

In the past fifteen years, no method of breaking the hex had been discovered. One had to wonder if even Tuldarr was capable of this feat.

It was true enough that Tuldarr excelled above any other country in all matters magical. However, that was in terms of the country as a whole. On an individual level, even the king of Tuldarr couldn’t compare to any of the three witches. A fact that spoke to how overwhelmingly mighty the trio was. They were living calamities. The only way to guard against a disaster caused by one of them would be to never get involved with them to begin with.

Still, Doan couldn’t help but cling to even the faintest bit of hope, for dealing with a witch meant despair.

Though their arrival was sudden, King Calste of Tuldarr showed them to one of the halls immediately.

That was most likely due to the letter of introduction, which came from the king of the neighboring country.

Calste welcomed the guests with a bright smile. He was around the same age as the king of Farsas and a good deal younger than the rulers of other nations. He had a mild demeanor and a gentle countenance that exuded intelligence.

Upon hearing of the curse, Calste’s face darkened as he gazed at the prince. “I understand the gist of the situation. I should tell you that not every curse can be broken.”

Calste launched into a short explanation of how curses worked. The takeaway was that it was impossible to undo a curse placed by a spell caster on the level of a witch.

While Lazar looked white as a sheet, the prince listened with a placid expression. It was as if he was about to say, *In that case, let’s swing by the witch’s place, then.*

Doan massaged his temples, feeling a headache coming on.

Calste concluded his lesson on hexes solemnly. “…And so it’s theoretically conceivable that if you had a child with a woman in possession of very strong magical powers, she might be able to withstand the birth.”

“I see. I’ll take that into consideration,” the prince responded easily.

Calste looked more sorrowful about it than the prince did, but then the king noticed the longsword Lazar was holding. His eyes grew wide. “Is that…?”

“Yes, I’m very sorry. I always have it with me. This is the blade Akashia, the one passed down in Farsas,” answered the prince.

Lazar shot his friend a glare that clearly said *This is why I told you to leave it at home*, but the prince ignored it completely.

After Calste pondered for a bit, he seemed to reach some sort of decision and got to his feet. “I can’t do anything about that curse, but there may be a solution. Still, the chances are low…”

The three Farsasians exchanged puzzled glances, not sure exactly what he meant.

The king guided them deeper into the castle, where the group then descended several flights of stairs.

Finally, they came to a long underground passage. After walking it for a considerable amount of time, the group arrived at a large stone hall. The sprawling oval-shaped chamber contained a ring of eleven statues.

Doan looked around at the sculptures, which resembled neither human nor beast, and then gasped in awe. “It can’t be… Are these the mystical spirits of Tuldarr?”

“Indeed. The spirits who are not under the employ of the king exist here in statue form. I’m ashamed to admit that for the past hundred years, no ruler has been able to use the spirits, including myself. Once, the strongest mage in Tuldarr ruled the country, but now the throne is inherited through royal bloodlines, and the king’s magic is no longer quite that exceptional,” explained Calste with a self-deprecating smile. He spoke of it so modestly for a ruler. Perhaps he had an inferiority complex about his own abilities.

Feeling somewhat awkward, Doan nodded as he counted the number of statues. “…Isn’t one missing?” he whispered.

Since Tuldarr’s founding, there had always been twelve mystical spirits for its royalty to call upon. Yet there were only eleven statues in the chamber. If the king wasn’t using any, then where had the twelfth one gone?

Doan puzzled over this silently but thought he really couldn’t pry deeper. Meanwhile, Calste continued farther in. He passed the center of the room and went over to a door in the far rear.

It was exactly opposite the one they entered from. Small and wrought of white stone, intricate magical markings were carved onto its face.

The king of Tuldarr turned back to address the trio from Farsas. “This is as far as I can show you. No one has gone beyond this point in a very long time now.”

“Ah… Why is that?” asked Oscar.

“I’m not sure. I can only say it’s because no one has been invited. Therefore, the solution to your curse may also exist beyond this point,”

Calste stated vaguely, which puzzled the prince from Farsas. He checked to make sure Akashia was belted at his waist.

Because the king had showed them to this door after seeing Akashia, it was possible that dangerous magical traps lay ahead.

The bearer of the royal sword, the only weapon in the entire land that could neutralize all magic, glanced at Calste with some faint misgivings. “I apologize, but why are you going so far for us? While my curse is serious, this is a foreign country’s affair.”

Calste gave a weak smile in response to the prince’s very direct question. Moving a step to the side of the door, he gazed at its intricate markings. “That’s a good question. If you’re able to proceed past this point, our country may reap the benefits, too. In short, what comes next may benefit us both.”

What the king said seemed plausible enough, but there were some holes in his reasoning. While the prince maintained his suspicions, he nodded and went right up to the door.

Ultimately, the only way to know if this was worth the trouble was to try.

Curiosity piqued, the prince pressed on the white door. A light shock ran through his palm.

But it soon vanished, like snow melting.

The door opened the rest of the way on its own, and he stepped in without any hesitation. Lazar and Doan hurried to follow after their lord.

However, an invisible wall repelled them.

“What?!”

“Ugh…”

Lazar fell on his behind, while Doan faltered but remained standing. Their prince turned back to look at them with wide eyes. “What are you two doing?”

“What are *we* doing? Didn’t you feel anything, Your Highness?” retorted Lazar.

The prince had passed without incident. Doan reached out cautiously to touch the barrier between him and his prince. Sure enough, there was an invisible force there preventing anyone from trespassing.

“I don’t see any sort of spell here… It must be a magical barrier,” Doan concluded.

“…I thought so,” murmured Calste, his unease showing on his face a little. He eyed the man on the other side of the door. “I don’t know what’s going to happen, but be careful.”

“I will bear that in mind,” said the prince, before starting down the long corridor. The farther he got from the door, the darker it became.

After a while, he finally sighted a pinprick of light far in the distance and arrived at a new door. Just like the other, it was made of an alabaster material and engraved with markings.

Keeping his hand on Akashia, the prince pushed open the door. Bright light spilled into the hallway.

Narrowing his eyes against the blinding luminance, he eventually made out that he was in a space even larger and more cavernous than the chamber of statues.

The ceiling was very tall, and there was no furniture in the vast square room.

In the middle of it, a giant red dragon lay curled up asleep on the gray flagstones.

“What the…?” said the prince, naturally shocked to see a dragon occupying at least half the room. As if that wasn’t incredible enough, a girl with red hair was sitting on top of the creature, reading a book. The whole spectacle was far beyond what the prince had anticipated, and the man stood rooted to the spot in astonishment.

The girl popped her head up, noticing the visitor. Her eyes were the same shade as her hair. Her beautiful face didn’t match her age, and her expression betrayed no emotion. Something about her was certainly strange, and the prince wondered what it was.

“Hmm, you’re a year early. Still, I guess if you’re here, that means it’s time,” she declared, closing her book before artlessly slapping the dragon’s head.

“Nark! Wake up! I can’t identify him!” she cried. In response to her pats, the dragon slowly lifted its head. The girl leaped off its back in a way that suggested she was weightless. The dragon’s huge eyelids opened to reveal eyes like a pair of flames that gazed at the prince.

“…Ah!” cried the prince, drawing Akashia reflexively.

He never expected a dragon to be sleeping underneath the castle. Even though he possessed the royal sword, his whole body tensed up as he nervously wondered if he could fight there without an escape route.

After gazing at him for a time, the dragon suddenly contorted itself. In a flash, it shrank to the size of a hawk and flew to him with a spirited cry.

The prince had thought he would have to cut the dragon down, but it didn’t appear hostile in the least. Hesitantly, the prince held out his left hand, and the dragon used it to land on his shoulder. It rubbed against his head just like a cat, and the girl burst out laughing. “Oh, so it really is you? That’s fine, then. Go ahead.”

As though in response to her voice, a door appeared in the wall on the far side of the chamber. The prince gasped to see a third white door.

“What are you?” he asked the strange young woman. “What are you doing here?”

Her looks and behavior made it clear she was more than a regular human. That she was present in this sealed-off place was already strange, and the prince still felt very much on guard.

The girl gave a light shrug. “I’m just a sentry. It doesn’t matter who I am, does it?”

She moved over to the door, then knelt down in a theatrical fashion. “Go on in. You are, after all, the one and only greatest treasure in the world.”

"…Greatest treasure?" the prince repeated.

None of this was adding up. The prince felt as if each twist and turn was more mystifying than the last.

But like the dragon, the girl didn't seem hostile toward him at all. Though still suspicious, he continued to the next door as the young woman had instructed.

The entrance opened all on its own, without so much as a touch.

Beyond it, he could see a lush green garden.

"What…?"

The soft light pouring in looked exactly the same as the light aboveground.

A carpet of luxuriant grass coated the wide room as far as the eye could see; it was dotted here and there with trees laden with bright-green leaves.

Unable to believe his eyes, the man stepped forward. A white wall extended from the doorway, but it quickly disappeared into the verdant flora.

It looked like a garden one could find on the surface, captured inside a white box.

The prince could hear a stream babbling from somewhere unseen. A gentle breeze whooshed past, and he muttered in shock, "What is this place…?"

He would have taken it for a magic illusion, but the feel of the grass underfoot was undeniably real. The wind rustled a gauzelike canopy beyond the trees. That was clearly something fabricated by human hands.

Is that a bed? the prince thought doubtfully, cautiously venturing farther into the garden.

As he approached it, he could see enough to identify that it really was a bed.

Akashia in hand, he came up to stand before the white thing. Nervously, he parted the gauzelike curtains and then gasped.

A young woman slept upon the sheets.

She looked to be about eighteen. Her silky, glossy long black hair fanned out across the linens.

Long eyelashes cast faint shadows on her porcelain skin.

Her nose was high and elegant, her lips red and dainty. The woman's features were as delicate as a sculptor's finest masterpiece. She was utterly beautiful.

It was the prince's first time seeing a woman who left such an impression on him. He felt disappointed that her eyes were closed; he wished to know what color they were.

The woman's cheeks were ivory, but they weren't bloodless and pale. He scrutinized her form, curious to know if she was alive, and noticed that beneath her white dress, her chest was rising and falling.

Staring at her, the prince sat down on the edge of the bed.

He didn’t know if he should rouse her, or if she would wake on her own. Yet he understood that this place existed solely for her.

In that case, perhaps she held the key to breaking the curse.

She might even be the woman with the power to bear his child who Calste had mentioned.

The prince reached out a hand and touched her cheek. Warmth from her skin leaped into his fingertips.

He gave the woman a light pat but withdrew his hand when he noticed her eyelashes stirring. Very slowly, she opened her eyes.

Over and over, her eyelashes fluttered up and down, revealing deep-black eyes, a color darker than night. The ebony there was like an abyss. After those orbs darted around, they landed on the prince.

These are the eyes of one with a strong will.

He was a little surprised by that.

The woman stretched out her lithe frame, as absentmindedly as if she were still dreaming, then used her arms to lever herself upright on the bed.

Her gaze had never left the prince. He didn’t know what to say. The mere sight of the darkness in her eyes had trapped him.

She sat up, then extended her supple alabaster arms out toward him. The prince hesitated over whether to shake her off, but he was distracted by how excited the dragon on his shoulder was.

The woman wound her arms around his neck, leaning her slender body against him.

“Oscar…,” she said, her voice as hot as tears.

While stupefied by the sudden warm body in his lap, Oscar was more stunned that this woman knew his name. He used one hand to peel her away and glared at her. “Who are you? Why do you know my name?”

Her dark eyes grew wide for a second. A vague light flashed across that unfathomable abyss.

She looked hurt—like a lost child, someone who was searching for a distant home.

Yet after she gave a long, slow blink, that glint disappeared entirely. Oscar frowned at the subtle change but thought that maybe his eyes had played a trick on him.

The woman pulled back, withdrawing from Oscar’s grasp, and gave a slightly lonely smile. “…You’re the one who inherited the royal sword of Farsas, aren’t you?”

“Oh, I see,” Oscar said, glancing down at the weapon by his waist. Ordinarily, the king of Farsas was the only one in the whole land to wear Akashia. Oscar was an exception because he had inherited the royal sword prior to becoming king, but he didn’t hide that fact. Spotting the blade was enough to know he was the crown prince.

“It really…is you,” the woman said, sighing. Oscar looked at her, and she stared back, gaze unwavering.

Her eyes were as unpredictable as the night. Emotion had risen to the top of those inky pools.

Her feelings were as plain as a child’s—but incredibly charged. No woman had ever stared at Oscar like this before. Her gaze was so much more earnest and overwhelming. Feeling that if he kept looking into her eyes, the heat there would spread to him, too, Oscar let out a breath he had instinctively been holding.

Casually, he averted his gaze and asked, “So what are you doing here? What kind of person lives under a castle?”

“Oh… I fell asleep. I’m a mage, so I used magic…,” she answered.

“You need magic to go to sleep? Things sure are weird in the Magic Empire,” he commented.

“It’s a type of spell that can control your internal body clock while time passes. Men can’t use it safely, however, so not many people have put it into practice…”

“I’m not sure I follow, but I understand that you used a spell,” Oscar stated frankly, and the woman blushed happily. The expression made her look much younger than she was.

Placing her hands on the bed, she crawled over to Oscar and looked up at him with that beautiful face of hers. “If you’re here, does that mean it’s currently the year 527 in Farsas time?”

“No, it’s 526,” he replied.

“Huh? One year early?” she remarked.

“What’s one year early? I think it’s 653 by Tuldarr reckoning. Are you all right?”

“Oh, I-I’m fine,” she answered, pressing her hands to her flushed cheeks. After falling into thought for a while, she asked nervously, “Um, are you married to someone else…?”

“I’m not married. What do you mean ‘to someone else’? How much do you know?”

Oscar had been permitted this deep into the castle in order to break his curse, yet if this woman was making inquiries like that, then she must have already known about his situation. Did she consider herself a suitable bride for him?

The prince suddenly felt on guard, and in response to his questions, the woman flushed even more intensely. “I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to… That was rude of me.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Oscar said dismissively. He thought all her blushing was cute. However, it didn’t seem like her query had anything to do with his curse. Despite his misgivings, he was reluctant to point that out right to her face.

The woman shuffled down the bed until she was next to him, then put her feet on the grass. She tried to stand but immediately fell back and flopped into a sitting position.

Taken aback, Oscar helped her sit up. “What are you doing? Are you okay?”

“I haven’t walked in so long… Still, my muscles haven’t atrophied, so I should be okay,” she explained, giving him an awkward smile as she curled in on herself.

Oscar returned Akashia to its sheath, then reached out and picked her up. She was so unnaturally light it was as if her body had wings. “Where do you wish to go? Actually, I never got your name.”

The woman’s dark eyes widened, and then she flashed him a pleased smile. “My name is Tinasha. It’s nice to meet you.”

Her smile was as bright and vivid as a flower—and contagious, as Oscar broke into a grin, too.

When Oscar emerged from the room with the woman in his arms, the crimson-haired girl let out an elated shout. “Lady Tinasha! You woke up? Are you feeling well?”

“Yes, thanks to you. I’m very grateful, Mila,” replied Tinasha.

Mila grinned in satisfaction after Tinasha acknowledged her efforts, then vanished.

It was so sudden that Oscar frowned. “What in the world *is* she? She’s not human, right?”

“That’s one of my spirits. She serves me… But she’s more like a friend,” Tinasha said, stretching out a hand. The small dragon flew over to it. She

picked it up and placed it on Oscar's shoulder. "This little one's name is Nark, and it'll do what you say. You're its master."

"I am? Really?"

"Yes, really. It likes you, doesn't it?" Tinasha pointed out.

"I've never seen a dragon that's fond of people," Oscar remarked.

Tinasha burst out laughing. The sound was like tinkling bells, ringing in Oscar's ears pleasantly.

Oscar carried Tinasha down the long corridor, and they approached the door where he had separated from the others. When he reached the other side, the three men waiting there were shocked to see Tinasha. Calste in particular stared at her in disbelief.

Oscar was confused by the king's behavior. "I found a dragon and her inside… Does this mean I can take her back to Farsas as my bride?"

"What?!" cried not Calste but the woman in Oscar's arms.

She pressed both hands to her pink cheeks and stared up at him. "H-how did things get to that point all of a sudden?"

"The curse…," he started to explain, but she cut him off.

"Oh!" Tinasha cried in a tone of understanding. Then she muttered in relief, "It really is a good thing you came…"

While Oscar still didn't understand what she meant, he returned his gaze to Calste. The king's look of shock finally morphed into a grimace. "I'm afraid I can't allow that. She is meant to be the next queen of our country."

"WHAT?!" Tinasha yelped in astonishment once more. "Why would it come to that? After all, I'm…"

"I know who you are, which is precisely why I'm asking. For the past hundreds of years, we have not had a king or queen who can summon the mystical spirits. That's how much the royal family's magic has weakened," Calste explained.

"A ruler does not need to have magic," Tinasha stated crisply, her voice cool, resolute, and clearly resonant. Oscar looked at her in surprise to see that her dark eyes had narrowed a fraction and lit up with a firm, majestic glint.

The gaze of a leader.

Even among royalty, not many had such eyes—imbued with the power to conquer others.

Oscar was impressed.

Tinasha nudged him to let her down. He did, while continuing to help her stay upright. She took two or three stumbling steps before straightening her posture and fixing her gaze on Calste. "There is no absolute need for a ruler to be a powerful mage. Even if one person has a great amount of power, the reach of that might is limited. Isn't there something even more important for the country?"

"Regardless of what that may be, it doesn't change the fact that it's necessary for a country to have enough power to protect itself. You are the one who our nation needs right now," Calste responded.

“Too much strength will give rise to alarm,” Tinasha countered.

It didn’t look like either side was going to concede.

Tinasha noticed how bewildered the three Farsasians were and looked up at Oscar apologetically. “I’m sorry. I need to speak to him for a moment, so could you wait outside?”

“All right, but…”

“I promise I’ll do something about your curse,” she assured, grinning at the prince confidently.

Oscar nodded, though still unsure of what was happening.

The three Farsasians returned to the hall where they had first met with Calste and exchanged confused looks over how things had escalated. Lazar asked the most obvious question: “Who in the world is that woman, Your Highness?”

“I don’t know, either. She was sleeping in a room beyond the barrier, so I brought her back,” Oscar answered.

“You should have asked her who she was! What do you think you were doing?!” exclaimed Lazar.

“Didn’t Calste say she was the next queen? And I did get her name. It’s Tinasha,” Oscar said.

“Then she bears the same name as the Witch Killer Queen,” Doan added.

Oscar recalled what he could of the mainland’s history. “From the time when Tuldarr was at war with Tayiri? So that was her name.”

“Yes, I believe so. Evidently, that queen was also very beautiful,” answered Doan.

Lazar looked between the other two, unable to follow the flow of conversation. “Wait, what? What witch? What queen?”

“You need to study your history,” Oscar chided.

“I did… Hey! Ow, ow, ow!” Lazar cried as Oscar ground his fists into Lazar’s temples.

Sighing, Doan launched into an explanation. “Four hundred years ago, Tuldarr and Tayiri went to war, right? Because Tuldarr was accepting persecuted mage refugees from Tayiri.”

“I kind of vaguely recall that…,” Lazar muttered doubtfully.

Oscar shoved him. “Any way you look at it, that was a turning point in history, wasn’t it? That was when Tuldarr started opening up to other nations.”

“Urgh… I’m sorry,” Lazar moaned, hanging his head.

Doan ignored him and went on. “Then Tayiri backed out of the conflict before it was clear which side would win. That was because an assassin was sent after the queen of Tuldarr—a witch, at that. The queen managed to turn the tables and slew the witch instead, but during their struggle, the witch let it slip that she was the lover of King Gaweid of Tayiri. To this day, we don’t know how much of that is true, but if King Gaweid truly ordered the witch after Tuldarr’s queen…”

“…Then that would be a huge scandal for him,” finished Lazar.

“Yes. Under internal pressure, King Gaweid was compelled to withdraw his forces and abdicate. After that, Tayiri gave its tacit consent of mage refugees emigrating to Tuldarr. Tinasha was the name of Tuldarr’s queen at the time, if I remember correctly,” Doan concluded.

“So that’s why she was called the Witch Killer Queen. It’s certainly quite the story,” remarked Lazar.

“It is. Curiously, that Tinasha also abdicated the throne soon after. Things were getting problematic for her in Tuldarr. Folks were saying that if she had enough strength to kill a witch, then she might very well be one herself. She was responsible for many progressive reforms, like opening up the country to diplomatic relations, which made her a target of the Traditionalists. And there was what had transpired with Tayiri as well. Thus, her relinquishing her queenship made both sides even, in a way,” said Doan.

“That’s so unreasonable that she would be forced to abdicate after everything she did…,” Lazar mused in wonder.

Oscar grimaced. “She was ahead of her time. It happens a lot.”

“That Tinasha is a famous ruler among mages. It’s not hard to conceive that the woman you found was named after her,” Doan reasoned, shrugging to indicate that the story was over.

Seeming appeased, Lazar looked at the ceiling and murmured, “Still, that woman truly is quite beautiful.”

“I thought Calste would let me have her. Rude,” Oscar muttered.

“Don’t steal the next queen of Tuldarr! It would be a diplomatic nightmare!” cried Lazar.

“Regardless, it seems I won’t be leaving empty-handed,” Oscar commented, glancing up at his shoulder. The dragon sitting there gave a little chirp. His attendants stared at the small creature questioningly.

“I did want to ask you what that is. It’s a dragon, right—? And a live one,” said Doan.

“Yep. Tinasha told me I’m its master. It was a lot bigger when we first met, so I guess it can change its size,” Oscar explained.

Lazar just sighed.

“It does sound like she’s going to do something about the curse, so our mission looks to be complete,” remarked Doan, internally quite relieved that they didn’t have to go see a witch now.

Heedless of Doan’s alleviation, his lord gave an offhand answer. “I wonder how she’ll solve it. Maybe she’ll marry me.”

“I just told you not to steal her!” wailed Lazar.

“There’s no need to shriek…,” Oscar grumbled.

Just then, the door opened, and Calste and Tinasha walked in. Calste wore a prim, unruffled expression. It cut a sharp contrast to Tinasha, who was sourly glowering.

When she saw Oscar, she looked uncomfortable as she admitted, “I’m now going to be coronated in half a year.”

“And until then, you may do as you like. You might enjoy wandering around outside after so long. I’ll have rooms prepared for you here in the palace,” Calste asserted, his tone amiable and warm.

Tinasha turned a cold gaze on him. “First, I’m going to break his curse. If I don’t, there was no point in him coming here.”

“You’re free to do so. However, please do keep your position in mind. If possible, I’d like for you to wed my son, after all,” Calste said.

“That’s outside my realm of responsibility,” she declared succinctly.

Noticing the tension between the two of them, Doan and Lazar exchanged glances.

Tinasha’s irritation was written all over her beautiful face, but her gaze softened when it fell upon Oscar. He saw that her conversation looked to be over for the moment, and he got up to beckon her over. “So what should I do?”

“I have quite a few things to get ready, and I need catalysts for the analysis… It would help me so much if you could stay nearby,” she answered.

“How long will it take?”

“I-I’m going to do my best, but…to make absolutely sure, I think it’ll take half a year. If I were starting the analysis from scratch, I wouldn’t be able to give such an estimate, but I have at least glimpsed the answer.”

“What answer?” Oscar asked.

Instead of telling him, Tinasha flashed a vague smile. There were parts Oscar hadn’t understood, but he gleaned that she could likely break the curse in six months’ time. Compared to the fifteen years others had spent at the task, it was a trifle. Oscar broke into a grin at this woman who had appeared before him. “Then you should come to Farsas until you’re coronated. Mages can use teleportation to go between Tuldarr and Farsas, right?”

“Wait, would that be all right? Really?” Tinasha asked, sounding excited.

“We’re the ones asking you to break the curse,” Oscar said.

Tinasha gave him a thrilled smile. It was so innocent it made her look like a young girl; she was adorable.

When Oscar glanced at Calste, the king of Tuldarr pasted on a smile. “Please take good care of her.”

Sensing something strained in his voice, Oscar winced as he bowed. Evidently detecting the same thing, Tinasha eyed the king distastefully.

Although the details were a bit complicated, the prince had found what he’d sought in coming to Tuldarr.

None yet knew that this was the beginning of a story that would affect the fate Oscar himself remained unaware of.

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“Is this all you brought?” Oscar blurted out when he came to the rooms allotted to Tinasha once they returned to Farsas.

The young woman’s belongings totaled a dozen ancient spell books and a bundle of magic implements, all packed into one wooden trunk. She possessed almost no attire or jewelry.

Oscar stared at this person Calste had designated the future queen of Tuldarr. “If there’s anything you need, just say so. We can have clothes made for you.”

“Thank you… Hmm? Clothes?” Tinasha said, blinking her long eyelashes several times. The closest thing she had to an attendant was the mystical spirit girl. Tinasha evidently decided Oscar must be joking and grinned at him. “I don’t have that many things, so I’m fine.”

That came as a disappointment to the prince; he had been thinking about what dresses might look good on her. Still, he intended to respect her wishes. He walked over to the trunk and helped her remove a large stone slab from it. “I can’t believe you’re going to be queen. If you’re royalty, then I need to change how I’ve been treating you.”

“What? It’s fine. That’d just set me on edge, so act as you have been,” Tinasha replied.

“Even so, you’re the next queen, so those around you are going to act respectfully in your presence.”

“I’m used to people treating me that way, but you’re different, Your Highness.”

“…I see,” Oscar responded after a lengthy pause. By nature, he didn’t like getting called Your Highness. For him, someone who would be king someday, it was an unwelcome reminder of the fact that he was still considered green and inexperienced.

He raked back his dark-brown, almost black hair. “In that case, call me by my name, too. That’s easier.”

In terms of status, they were equals, so there should have been no issue with that.

When Oscar made his somewhat childish request, Tinasha looked up at him. Her dark eyes grew wide, like a surprised kitten. “Do you say that… because there’s a chance that you’d marry me?!”

“How could there be? Why did you make it about that?”

That possibility might have existed for a moment in the underground room where they had met, but it vanished into thin air once Tinasha had been named the next queen of Tuldarr.

The woman slumped down dejectedly, cut down by Oscar’s immediate reply. “I thought maybe there was some small chance, but I guess it’s hopeless…”

“That’s jumping way too far ahead from just asking you to call me by name… I’m getting scared, so knock it off,” Oscar said.

Hearing her guess his name on their first encounter had already left him startled. To have a woman of such unreal beauty speak his name gave the

prince the sensation of ripples moving through his body, even now. While he was recalling that sensation, Tinasha broke out in a bittersweet grin. She gazed at Oscar with eyes that looked like windows at night, and her lips moved.

"Oscar."

Her voice was clear and resonant. The word, though only a whisper, was imbued with an irrepressible heat. It spoke of multitudes that he knew nothing of. His name in Tinasha's mouth was dizzying, but Oscar focused on maintaining his calm as he nodded. "That's fine. Do whatever's easiest. And we're not getting married."

"Don't emphasize that! You only had to say it once. I understand!" Tinasha cried.

"Incidentally, are you related by blood to the Tuldarr royal family?" inquired Oscar, abruptly changing the subject.

Tinasha looked to the prince with reproach. "Oh, honestly… No, I'm not. I was never married, after all. I feel strange about being called a princess, but I think Calste wanted to fetter me somewhat, so I compromised on that point. It's much better than getting named the crown prince's fiancée outright or something."

Judging by Tinasha's tone, she was sincere. The way Oscar had seen it, Calste wanted to have her marry his son, but he didn't want to offend her by insisting too much on that. Instead, he assigned her a royal status to keep her in check, but at the moment, she didn't seem bothered by that development. As might be expected from someone who agreed to become queen, Tinasha was quite resolute.

As Oscar set the stone slab on a shelf, he said, "I requested you to break my curse, but you can just think of it as having some fun before your coronation and spend your time as you like."

"Thank you. Although, to be honest, I wasn't planning on taking the throne," she answered.

"What even are you anyway? Why were you in that room?" Oscar asked. The order of his questions was a bit backward, but he couldn't help it—he really couldn't get a handle on who Tinasha was based on what she had told him so far.

Tinasha looked a bit bemused to hear that, but then she floated up into the air and flew over to him. Oscar was very surprised, and she smiled. "I was there because of my own selfishness."

"Selfishness? You were under the castle," he retorted.

"Yes, which is how accommodating they were of me," she responded with a lovely smile. Oscar was unable to tell if Tinasha was being sincere.

Suddenly, the woman's brows creased as if she were resisting some pain. She stared at Oscar through narrowed eyes. "…Can I touch you?"

Her voice was faint, and her dark gaze appeared to be watching something distant, not unlike when the pair had first met. She looked so sad that Oscar nodded after a pause.

Tinasha lowered herself a little and wound her arms around his neck and leaned against him as she had back on the bed in the forest room. She seemed so forlorn, and Oscar gently accepted her weight in his arms.

"When I was young, someone did a lot of things for me that I…can't ever repay. Yet I wished to do something in return, even if only a little. Although that person isn't here anymore…I still wanted to see them again," she said, her voice wavering emotionally.

Oscar gave up on listening to any more and just nodded.

After abdicating the throne of Tuldarr, Tinasha had thought she was done with everything she needed to do.

Even though she wouldn't be around, there were those who carried on her ideals. They would lead. Those five years when she focused solely on being queen, cutting all ties with the past, had passed by in a flash.

And once they were over, she thought back on the man. He who gave her his life and his love.

The few weeks they spent together was the most vivid period of time in Tinasha's life up until then…and it was also the happiest she had ever been. Merely recalling it moved her to tears.

Tinasha thought she would live out the rest of her life with that memory locked away in her heart, but one day a man appeared before her. He said "*I'm curious about the woman who killed a witch*" and soundly defeated her as though it were effortless. Even though she had the twelve mystical spirits, Tinasha lost the fight.

For that person, forcing Tinasha to yield was just one way of staving off boredom. He had healed her when she was at death's door, then his fickle interest shifted to asking her about her past.

Reluctantly, she told him everything.

"Then you should go after him," the one who bested her stated.

Tinasha couldn't deny that she wished to see Oscar again.

Hadn't he said they were married in the future?

If it was true they would meet in four hundred years, then there was still a chance.

She still had time.

Even if Tinasha didn't remember, and he didn't, either, even if there was no longer any evidence in the world that they ever lived together, even if there was no guarantee she could live by his side the same as before, she wanted to at least do something to repay him.

Seeing Oscar one final time would be enough.

And so after a long sleep, she was born into the world again.

Along with fearsome power that could rival a witch's.

"Four centuries truly is a long time. Magic research has progressed considerably. It's enough to make me feel like a relic," Tinasha admitted.

"The fundamental laws remain unaltered, so there's not much difference even if the spells have changed," Mila pointed out.

Tinasha and Mila were sitting at a table in Tinasha's quarters in Farsas Castle, having tea.

Tinasha made a wry face at that. "But I have to study up a little, although, I suppose I'll pick it up fast."

"You're so dedicated, Lady Tinasha."

"I like studying," she said, setting her teacup to the side and flipping through a spell book. The heavy tome was not one she had brought, but a volume borrowed from the Farsas library. Tinasha narrowed her eyes as she scanned the pages. The text outlined theories only a handful of people had known during her reign as queen.

The spirit girl grinned at Tinasha as she asked, "Do you want to get married to the swordsman of Akashia, Lady Tinasha? If the king of Tuldarr is getting in your way, I can go kill him."

"You can't just go slaying people. You're still a spirit of Tuldarr. As for Oscar… Putting aside wedding him, I'm just happy I was able to see him," replied Tinasha.

"You're too indifferent!" scolded Mila.

"Really?" Tinasha asked. Despite the spirit's words, she was satisfied with how things were. She was purely content to be of use to Oscar.

Tinasha picked up some old papers on the table. These were the notes she had taken as a girl when she extracted Oscar's blood to look at the curse and blessing spells placed on him. "I guess I really was the one who broke the curse once…"

"I don't understand it, either, and that story about him returning to the past still sounds super-fishy to me. Is the Akashia swordsman really the same person?" questioned Mila suspiciously.

"I only half believed it, too… But there can be no mistaking it, even though he doesn't have his memories. When he saved me, he told me he had altered the past, so that must have affected the course of history," Tinasha explained.

When Oscar had saved the young Tinasha, he knew she was going to be used as a catalyst in a forbidden ritual that night. Originally, she would have had to face the violence inflicted on her alone. Oscar's interference undoubtedly changed many things from that point on. At the very least, there were no signs that Tinasha could marry him at present, and if she became queen of Tuldarr, then it would be impossible for her to become the bride of another country's king. History had certainly changed when it came to her circumstances.

Feeling dejected, though she wasn't fully aware of it, Tinasha put her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands. "I'm still suspicious of that magical orb… Travis seemed to know something about it."

"Don't invoke his name. He's dangerous," warned Mila, making a face.

"Sorry," Tinasha apologized meekly.

In any case, it was true you could go back in time.

Tinasha had sealed away that magical orb deep in the Tuldarr treasure vault, and if what past Oscar had said was correct, there may be another one in the Farsas treasure vault.

Tinasha eyed the mass of intricate, delicate—almost beautiful—spell configurations drawn in the book.

If her previous self worked through this from scratch, that meant her magical skills were far more exceptional than Tinasha's now.

Why had the other Tinasha encountered Oscar after four hundred years? How did she come to possess skills that were beyond human understanding?

That story, the tale of the king and the fifth witch, was one that no one knew anymore—it no longer existed.

2. Emotionless Words

The aroma of good tea drifted to the ceiling of Oscar's study.

On that calm, relaxing afternoon, Oscar took a sip from the cup he was given. His eyes grew wide. "It's good."

"Oh! Really? Thank you!" Tinasha, who had made the brew, grinned. She was dressed in a white mage's robe. Her smile was pure and pleased.

Oscar gave her an exasperated look. "Why is a queen so good at making tea? Is this your hobby or something?"

"No, it was so I didn't get poisoned and killed. It's best to limit the number of people involved in making the things you consume, right?"

"You're speaking about it like this is common knowledge. Are you living in your own personal Dark Age?" the prince quipped.

"By the way, I can cook most things, too. Would you like to try some of my dishes?" she asked.

"No, thanks. I have a feeling you'd put something in it compelling me to marry you," he said.

"I'm not trying to do that!" Tinasha protested, and Oscar laughed out loud.

She had come to draw some of his blood for analysis and, while she was there, had brewed tea, taking over for Lazar, who was buried in paperwork.

Oscar didn't like making the ladies-in-waiting handle his dressing and grooming, so he did almost everything himself, or he delegated it to Lazar. The young man served the crown prince as his attendant because of their relationship as childhood friends.

He was often overloaded with all sorts of work, and he bowed guiltily toward Tinasha. "I'm so sorry, Princess, to make you brew the tea…"

"O-oh, don't worry about it. I'm just a spirit sorcerer who has a bit too much magic. It's not like I'm highborn or anything. If you liked the tea, I'll come make it anytime you like," she offered.

"Hmm? You're a spirit sorcerer?" cut in Oscar.

"More or less. I use spiritual magic often," she answered.

Even Oscar, not well versed in spells, knew that spirit sorcerers were a special type of mage. Spiritual magic could achieve a much greater effect

with the same portion of magical power compared to other magics. But in exchange, the moment spirit sorcerers lost their chastity, the amount of power they needed to work their spells would skyrocket.

In the past, that chastity was thought of as more of a requirement to use spiritual magic, but modern Tuldarr research had elucidated the truth. In theory, spirit sorcerers with an immense quantity of magical power or outstanding spell casting could still use spiritual magic even after losing their chastity. However, in reality, there was not yet a mage who was an exception to that rule.

Oscar wondered if Tinasha could be the first.

Since the king of Tuldarr was so fixated on the idea of making this next queen his son's wife, Oscar surmised that meant she was a capable mage. But he hadn't actually seen her using any spiritual magic.

While Tinasha had stated she was not of noble birth, it was apparent from observing her manner and demeanor that she had received a first-class education. And taking into consideration the fact that she was asleep under the castle, he decided her origins couldn't have been ordinary. Oscar paused in his work to stare at Tinasha as she sauntered away. Perhaps the woman sensed his eyes on her, for she gave him an innocent smile as she left the room.

Once it was just the two childhood friends, Oscar rested his face in one hand apathetically. "I don't know how to describe it. It's hard to get a handle on her. At times, she really reminds me of a kid."

"Do you think so?" Lazar asked, tilting his head. He didn't see her that way, but evidently his lord did. Oscar stared at the door Tinasha had left through, a bored look on his face. Ultimately, he let out a little sigh and returned to his work.

Once back in her chamber, Tinasha retrieved a glass vial and shook it lightly. The blood inside wobbled viscously. As she did that, she moved to stand in front of a scrying bowl placed in the center of the room.

Sigils for a basic medical spell were carved at the foot of the basin of pale water. Tinasha opened the vial and carefully tipped it sideways. A single bead of blood trickled into the bowl.

Once that drop spread into the water, the sigils on the bottom glowed faintly. Tinasha dripped in a few more beads of crimson, then stoppered the vial and directed her attention to the scrying bowl.

"Here we go."

To break the curse, she first needed to understand the full shape of it.

If she didn't extract the spell configuration and analyze it further, she wouldn't be able to undo the hex. It was difficult just to analyze a curse constructed of the spell caster's own distinctive language. Muttering an incantation, Tinasha pulled the spell configuration from the basin.

One reason she was here after four hundred years was to break this curse. The young woman concentrated so intensely that she forgot to

breathe. The formation of the curse ensorcelling Oscar expanded out from the small amount of blood. It was terrifyingly elaborate and immeasurable.

Three hours later, Tinasha extracted the spell that was laid on him.

"This spell…"

The configuration spilling from the scrying bowl wasn't the sort of magic generally cast on individuals. It was so complex that it was more appropriate for an entire country. No—this *was* something laid upon a nation. If the crown prince couldn't bear heirs, then the royal bloodline would die out, and the royal sword Akashia would be masterless. If this hex had been evoked with all that in mind, then it was no wonder it was so intricate.

Tinasha suppressed a sigh and picked up a book at her side. She took out an old paper folded between its pages. It was a diagram of the spell configuration she had extracted from Oscar's blood four centuries ago.

"It really is…the same one."

In the past, she had recorded two separate spell configurations. Before her floated the one that matched the blessing enchantment.

Back then, Oscar had explained that he had received a blessing that was too powerful, thus a curse had been cast on him to cancel it out. He was right. The thing plaguing him was indeed not a curse, but a blessing.

The work of magic Tinasha beheld in the scrying bowl now was identical down to the tiniest details. Oscar's altering of history hadn't changed that, evidently. This so-called amending of the past may not have had a widespread effect.

The one fact of reality was that Oscar was shackled with this incredibly complex thing.

Tinasha was curious about why he had such a heavy blessing placed on him, but it wasn't her place to ask. Instead, she thought it a relief that the spell she was examining matched the one she had seen centuries ago. Had it been different, finding a means of dispelling it would have required more than a lifetime.

This was where the real work began.

Now that she understood what she was up against, Tinasha needed to decipher the conflicting curse and blessing simultaneously.

Two spells, forged of alarmingly prominent magical skills.

Tinasha sighed unconsciously when she considered the difference in proficiency between the caster behind such a spell and her current self. Yet at the same time, it also filled her with tingling excitement.

Creating a new spell, putting it in order, and analyzing an existing enchantment—all of it was very intellectually stimulating work. Her mind went wonderfully blank. This would prove to be excellent training.

The more difficult a conundrum was, the more gratifying the satisfaction when Tinasha came to the answer. That was one reason she loved research. She had done it over and over before, and it had made her into the greatest queen, one famed for her spell craft.

No matter how elusive the solution was, she would reach it—chasing it down, if necessary.

A daring smile formed on the young woman's lips. Tinasha faced the spell and started an incantation.

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That day, a lady-in-waiting named Carla made her way briskly down a corridor in the castle long after nightfall.

She had spent the entire day organizing Farsas Castle's tableware storehouse, and by the time she realized it had taken longer than anticipated, it was already after dusk.

By this hour, most of the castle staff had returned to their lodgings on the castle grounds or their homes in town. The corridors were deserted. As Carla hurried through the deathly still passages on her way back to her quarters, something outside a window caught her eye. Her heart stopped.

A man dressed all in black was standing under a tree in the outer gardens.

The hood pulled low over his eyes and his head-to-toe black garb made it obvious he wasn't someone who ought to have been there. Carla couldn't see his face, but he appeared to be looking up toward the castle, judging by the angle of his head. The instant she realized that, a shiver ran down Carla's spine.

"I need to tell someone…," she said softly.

Surely, he was an intruder of some kind. The lady-in-waiting set off at a run, but when she glanced outside the window again to check on him, she froze.

"What…? How?"

She had only taken her eyes off him for two or three seconds, yet there was no one standing under the tree now.

What *was* that man? Feeling as if she'd witnessed something she shouldn't have, Carla suppressed a scream and fled back to the servants' lodgings. Once she reached her room, she woke up her fellow ladies-in-waiting and explained what had transpired, flustered all the while.

Three days later, Carla died under mysterious circumstances.

And a short time after her demise, strange rumors began to circulate among those in the castle.

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"Apparently, there's a window you can see a ghost from," said Lazar in hushed, fearful tones.

Oscar looked up from his work to eye him balefully. He lifted the pen in his hand and retorted, "Bring me a more interesting tale if you intend to spread gossip. There's no such thing as ghosts."

“People seem to believe it, though. It’s one of the windows on the third floor,” Lazar insisted.

“The third floor of what?”

“Of this castle.”

“What?!” Oscar yelped despite himself, too shocked to hold it back. He didn’t think the story would involve Farsas Castle. Before he could request that Lazar tell him everything, there was a knock at the door. Oscar gave the word, and a beautiful black-haired mage came in.

“Sorry to disturb you. I was nearby, so I thought I’d drop in and make some tea,” Tinasha explained, curtsying before popping back up and beaming. That smile brought a glimmery sheen to the room, and Oscar found himself grinning slightly, too. She began to get the tea things ready.

Lazar went on with his story. “So actually—”

“Wait,” Oscar interrupted.

“Someone has died to the ghost—Huh? Why?” Lazar broke off.

“I told you to wait…,” Oscar grumbled, scowling because he hadn’t stopped Lazar in time. Many hated scary stories, and he didn’t want Tinasha to feel frightened in the foreign castle where she was staying. Unfortunately, it was too late.

Yet Tinasha went about the task of preparing tea, her expression placid and calm. Aware of Oscar’s eyes on her, she turned and flashed a smile. “There’s no such thing as ghosts. The mind can’t exist without the body, and the soul is the vessel for the power that forms the core of all living beings. When we die, it disperses and nothing remains.”

The mage’s crisp answer stunned Lazar. “But you hear so many stories of lingering souls…”

“Those are almost always tales of demonic spirits or spells. Even if magic can be used to temporarily contain a soul that has lost its body, it no longer has a personality or shape,” Tinasha stated.

“I see…,” Lazar muttered, looking both relieved and disappointed at the same time.

Oscar, on the other hand, was satisfied with Tinasha’s exceedingly rational response. He decided to keep grilling Lazar for details. “For now, just tell us everything you know. You said someone died?”

“Yes, a lady-in-waiting named Carla. Supposedly, one night about a week ago, she saw a ghost wearing all black in a castle garden. Three days after she told everyone about it, she perished under strange circumstances… Ever since, folks have been saying you can see a ghost if you look out that window at night,” explained Lazar.

“Wow. I don’t even know where to begin with this one,” Oscar quipped dryly, pressing the nib of the pen he had just used to sign a document into his temple. This account was too fishy to take seriously, but since rumors were flying about a death, simply ignoring it was unwise. “First, let’s start with the figure all in black that she saw. How do we know that’s a ghost?”

“Because two or three seconds after poor Carla saw it, she looked back, and it was gone…,” answered Lazar.

“That just sounds like a suspicious intruder, doesn’t it?” Oscar said irritably.

“M-maybe,” Lazar admitted with a stiff face, giving a perfunctory retort.

Giggling, Tinasha poured tea into the teacups. The laugh left Oscar feeling a bit uncomfortable. “And what was so unusual about her death?”

“All of a sudden, she began vomiting blood and met her end writhing in agony. The bizarre manner of her death prompted the mages to conduct an autopsy, but they found nothing,” Lazar responded.

“Hmm,” Oscar replied skeptically.

“Is her body still around? Could I take a look at it?” Tinasha asked as she set a cup down in front of Oscar. The lurid request didn’t match her lovely appearance, and both men stared at her. Flustered, she looked between the two of them. “Wh-what? Is it so odd a request?”

“No… I’d like you to examine it, if possible…,” Oscar muttered.

“Her surviving family claimed the b-body, but there may still be some blood taken from it in the mages’ laboratories,” offered Lazar warily.

“Is that so? I see. Thank you,” answered Tinasha, giving Lazar a warm expression.

Oscar frowned. Tinasha really was suspicious. Her appearance and her temperament didn’t match at all.

He realized he still didn’t know anything about her past. He hadn’t asked because the young woman didn’t look like she wanted to talk about it, but it was possible she had once known death and battle.

Oscar gave an unnoticeable exhale and signed the paper before him. Then he glared at Lazar again. “So? How does the story of ghost sightings from that window end?!”

“Don’t get mad at me… It’s just hearsay. The ladies-in-waiting know which window it is, I think…,” Lazar replied.

“Then how about you take responsibility and go investigate it?!” Oscar barked.

“Eek!” Lazar cried, cowering and about to flee the room. Oscar balled up a paper he had messed up on and launched it at his shamefaced friend’s head. It hit the target.

“I don’t think you could handle something like that, actually. Do you know which mage did the autopsy?” Oscar questioned.

“Master Kumu and…a mage named Lita, I think.”

“Kumu is busy, so we’ll have Lita and Doan or someone else do it. Tinasha?” Oscar said.

“Yes, what would you like me to do? Ask away,” she said with a smile, looking like a cat with its tail held taut in the air.

Oscar looked exasperated. “Why do you seem so eager…? I only want you to scribe a report if you’re going to examine the body.”

“Leave it to me,” she stated.

“Thank you. Admittedly, I’m not really expecting much. I’m just giving this a try because it can’t hurt,” remarked Oscar.

“You’re saying that to my face?! I’ll have you know that my confidence is certainly not baseless!” Tinasha protested.

“I’m joking. Though, I sincerely don’t mind if this all amounts to nothing.”

“…Ungh,” Tinasha groaned, which Oscar ignored as he wrote out an order for investigation on a fresh sheet and handed it to Lazar. Finally, he picked up the cup of tea next to him. A richer aroma than usual wafted up to his nostrils, the result of Tinasha’s steeping. He took a sip, and the scent pervaded his lungs, relieving some of the fatigue that had built up within him.

Recalling something, Oscar said to Tinasha, “Oh, that’s right, the ladies-in-waiting didn’t know what to do because you wouldn’t eat much of your lunch. Afraid of getting poisoned again?”

“What? Oh, n-no. I was just so absorbed in my analysis that I didn’t notice… And I ate breakfast!” she asserted.

“You don’t have to keep at it that stubbornly. If it’s impossible, just say so. I wasn’t expecting much anyway,” Oscar remarked lightly.

“Seriously, why would you say that to my face?! I’m analyzing everything properly, and in the unlikely event that I can’t solve this, I’ll just have your child, so it’s fine!” she burst out.

“…What?” Oscar was dumbfounded. Her sudden declaration had both men staring at her, aghast. However, Tinasha seemed to have no clue that she had said anything unusual as she stood there indignantly with both hands planted on her waist.

While Lazar was struck motionless, a grimace marred Oscar’s handsome features. “Listen here… What do you think you’re doing, trying so hard to marry me? What are you after?”

“I-I’m not after anything! Stop misunderstanding! I’m only saying that my magic is strong enough for me to beat the curse and give birth to a child!” she protested.

“Oh, that makes sense. Right, of course that’s what it would be,” Oscar mused. The king of Tuldarr had said the mother of his child would need to be someone with powerful magic. Naturally, Tinasha fit that description.

Sourly, she added, “Of course, if I did, I’d give up any claims to royal positions. I wouldn’t do anything to inconvenience Farsas. Besides, you don’t have to be married to have a child with someone. I’d take full responsibility.”

“I do appreciate that, but… It’s not like you’re the one who caused this, so there’s no responsibility to speak of,” Oscar pointed out.

Tinasha was under no obligation to take on this task. In the worst-case scenario, she could end up refusing to break the curse because it was, after all, another country’s problem, and he would understand.

When she heard that, her eyes widened a little before she gave a weary smile. “I didn’t cause it, no… But *breaking* the curse really is my duty. Still, I’d feel awful if that became the reason for my blood to enter the Farsas royal lineage, so just wait for me to finish my analysis.”

The young woman closed her eyes. Her smile was a lonely one, giving the sense that she was very far away.

Once Tinasha left the room, Lazar let out a huge sigh. “She’s really something.”

“Wasn’t she supposed to have received a royal education? Perhaps that’s why she’s so determined,” commented Oscar.

He got the impression that her resoluteness was something deeply, unquestionably etched in her mind.

Yet at the same time, Oscar thought Tinasha also seemed a little insecure. That would need to be corrected if she was to be queen of Tuldarr. A ruler was the symbol of their nation—the support of the people. Any queen who looked down on herself didn’t deserve the service of her subjects.

Twirling his pen in his fingers, Oscar looked at Lazar. His attendant and friend met his gaze with a sullen expression of warning. When Oscar caught it, his lips curved up in a sly smirk. “Well, since she suggested it, maybe I *will* have her bear me a kid.”

“Absolutely not! Don’t try to use the last resort as your primary option!” Lazar shouted, as if he had been waiting for Oscar to suggest that.

Lazar’s predictable retort made Oscar burst out laughing. “I’m kidding. I don’t mind women who are pretty more than anything else, but I’m not interested,” he stated blithely, but his criticism was scathing.

Normally, Lazar didn’t hear his lord speak that way, and his expression clouded over with something more than just relief. “That’s an awful thing to say. I thought you liked her, Your Highness.”

“I think Tinasha’s interesting, but I still don’t know anything about her. And besides, she’s not really looking at me anyway,” Oscar replied.

“Do you truly think so?” Lazar pressed.

“I do.”

Oscar could tell as much simply by meeting the woman’s eyes.

Having lost interest, he ended the conversation there, sipping at his tea with one hand while leafing through papers with the other.

Tinasha went back to her room first to make some progress on her analysis. Once she reached a good stopping place, she went to visit the mages’ laboratory. She thought that, by then, Lazar would have notified them of her investigation.

As she suspected, Kumu, the chief mage, was there to greet her when she peeked into the room. The man was renowned for his high level of magic proficiency. Kumu ran a hand over his shiny shaved head before bowing. “I deeply apologize for troubling you to do this.”

“Not at all. I’m the one who’s overstepped my bounds in asking, so please excuse that,” Tinasha responded.

“I-I’m honored to be working with you! My name is Lita!” said the young woman next to Kumu with a vigorous bow. She was the mage who had been in charge of the autopsy. She smiled nervously at Tinasha while Kumu brought out three bottles from the back of the room.

“We took samples of her blood, stomach contents, and skin,” he explained, presenting the containers to Tinasha, who accepted them readily. Once, as a queen, she fought on the front lines of battle herself, where she witnessed gruesome deaths time and time again and also used magic to kill people. That was how rulers in the Dark Age lived.

Under the mages’ close supervision, Tinasha undid the bottles and began to recite an incantation. An intricate spell configuration poured into the containers one after another. Kumu and Lita gasped at the sight of the magic.

As her incantation finished, the beautiful mage from Tuldarr glanced at the three bottles with half-open eyes. Suddenly, she turned her face up and asked Lita, “What did the body look like?”

“Oh, ah… We confirmed that she vomited blood, and her eyes were wide open and bloodshot. There was blood and bits of skin under all her nails, as if she had raked them along her own body, and there were scratch marks on her neck and chest,” answered Lita.

“Did you look at her head?” Tinasha questioned.

“H-her head?” Lita repeated.

“Her scalp. Did you look at it soon after she died?”

“N-no, I didn’t…,” Lita admitted, trembling.

Kumu cut in. “Have you noticed something?”

“I think she was poisoned with a magical draught. It’s an old type of potion, but I’m pretty confident,” Tinasha replied.

“That’s—,” sputtered the mages as they tensed up. Because the autopsy didn’t detect any sort of toxin, Carla’s death was declared to be from unknown causes. But if she *had* died by poisoning, that changed things considerably.

With a grimace, Tinasha looked around as she capped the bottles. “Could I borrow these for a bit? I’d like to extract the traces of the poison and identify who made it.”

“Identify who made it?! You can do that?”

“What? Isn’t that beyond what our technology can do?”

“That’s the first I’m hearing of this…”

Kumu and other mages in the laboratory expressed their shock, but Tinasha said nothing.

Ever since she woke up, she had been studying desperately to fill in the four-hundred-year-long gap in her knowledge, but there were many things unrecorded in books.

The spell to identify the maker of a potion was difficult to cast, and back then in Tuldarr, only a few mages were able to use it. After four centuries, she would have thought that the spell would have been revamped and widely taught. Yet for some reason, such was not the case. Beneath the intense stares bearing down on her, Tinasha felt a headache coming on.

She didn't exactly need to hide the fact that she had come from the past, but if she revealed it willingly, people would only question her sanity.

Tinasha grinned brightly. "It's my specialty spell."

"Y-you mean it's one you devised yourself?" asked Kumu.

"No, but I'll go over the details another time. For now, I'm going to investigate this. May I take these back to my chamber?" she inquired again.

"Oh, er… Yes, you can. Please go ahead," Kumu responded.

Calm and collected, Tinasha tucked the bottles away in her pocket. Kumu looked like he still had things he wanted to ask her, but he gave up on them with a light shake of his head.

To Lita, Kumu instructed, "This is the perfect chance for her to see the window that's the source of all the rumors. Show her the way there."

"Oh… Me? But there are ghosts there…," Lita said hesitantly, looking around the room for someone to take her place.

Doan raised his hand. "We have to investigate the window; that's what His Highness has asked for. I'll go, too."

"So does that mean I still have to do it…?" Lita questioned apprehensively.

"Of course you do," Doan retorted.

Amid the mages' bickering, Tinasha tactfully interjected, "Ah, I can go on my own if you'll just tell me where it is. I'm sure you all have work to do."

"This is their work, so please don't worry about them. Lita, go," Kumu ordered for the second time.

"All right…," Lita replied, hanging her head.

With Doan leading the way, the three made their way through the castle, lit with afternoon sunshine. As they walked down a lengthy corridor, Lita asked Tinasha timidly, "C-can you really identify who made the potion? And were there traces of it that you could see? I wasn't able to detect any…"

"It's no wonder you couldn't. It's a type of poison that's unrecognizable without preexisting knowledge. There are multiple types of potions that don't leave any traces. If you start by suspecting that it may be one of those, you can more or less make a guess. Have you ever heard of maseira?"

"Huh? What?" Lita stammered.

Doan answered evenly. "I haven't. Is that the potion the killer used?"

"I think it might be, although I can't say for sure until I do a bit more proper research," Tinasha said with a shrug.

They reached the hallway with the purported ghost window. Lita jogged over, clearly wanting to finish her loathsome task quickly.

“Wh-which one was it again?” she wondered aloud, trotting from pane to pane and touching them.

Tinasha and Doan sauntered over behind her and inspected. There were about a hundred windows in the long corridor, and it took roughly a half hour for Doan to examine them all. He sighed, slightly exhausted, and turned back to Tinasha. “Nothing seems to be here.”

“No, it doesn’t,” she agreed.

“C-can you only see the ghosts at night?” offered Lita, who had rejoined them.

Doan pondered that. It was true there weren’t many rumors of spotting a ghost in the daytime. However, that was assuming ghosts existed to begin with.

Doan, who didn’t believe in such things, almost revealed in his expression how much of a bother he found this, but he took care to conceal that feeling in front of Tinasha. “Then we’ll make our rounds of the windows at night. We’ll ask the soldiers to look from the outside, and Lita and I will take the inside…”

“M-me?! I’m not good with ghosts… Oh wow, my stomach. It hurts so much.”

Doan eyed her coldly as she clutched her stomach. An amused smile playing on her lips, Tinasha cut in. “Well, it can be unsafe for women at night, so you can ask one of the men to sub in for you if there are no objections.”

Doan thought over the lovely princess’s words and nodded. Lita wasn’t likely to be of much help anyway, even if she came along. It would be prudent to bring someone else. “All right, we’ll do that, then. I’ll notify you if we have any findings.”

“Please do, thanks,” said Tinasha, and she parted from them there to drop in briefly on the study before going back to her rooms.

At midnight, Doan and his fellow mage Kav were patrolling the windows, as they had been doing since an hour after dinnertime. So far there was nothing amiss. Looking outside only revealed the flickering lights of the torches the soldiers on patrol carried.

Doan gave a little sigh. “I guess it’s just a rumor after all.”

“But the Tuldarr princess said someone used a potion, right? That she possesses a spell that can determine who made it is incredible. I wonder if she’d teach it to us…,” mused Kav.

“Normally, Tuldarr wouldn’t let a secret like that slip to another country,” replied Doan, thinking back on Tinasha. She possessed frightening beauty and magical ability. Yet she wasn’t the king’s daughter. So then, what was she? Was it really a good idea that they had invited this mysterious woman who had been sleeping under a castle to Farsas?

“She couldn’t be a witch, could she…?”

No one knew the ages or faces of the only three witches in the land. He didn't want to think that Tinasha could be one of them, but he also couldn't rule it out at this point.

Doan glanced outside the window.

That was when the muffled *bang* of an explosion sounded.

"What was that?!"

They had felt the impact from the blast ripple through the castle wall, and the two mages exchanged glances.

Farsas Castle, which had been asleep, quickly awoke in furious activity. Shortly before Doan heard the explosion, Tinasha had gone to bed.

Her spacious bedroom was neat and tidy, with few objects. An assortment of spell books lined half the bookshelves along the wall, and magic implements occupied the empty spaces.

On top of the desk by the window, moonlight shone in on the three bottles of samples she had borrowed from the lab.

Gauze curtains were drawn around the canopy bed at the back of the room. Oscar had requested them to be made to resemble the ones that hung at the bed underneath the Tuldarr palace.

The pale glow of the moon poured in from the window. The aperture had been cracked to allow a breeze in, and someone quietly pushed it open from the outside.

An intruder entered, their footsteps muffled. The trespasser glanced at the bed to make sure Tinasha was asleep, then picked up the bottles on the desk. After verifying their contents, the intruder breathed a sigh of relief. They stowed the bottles away and put a hand on the window.

But before they could take a step, an impassable barrier rose over the window.

At the same time, the lights in the room flickered to life.

"You're so predictable. You should have tried a cleverer approach," spat the woman with evident disgust.

The trespasser flinched in shock and whirled to face the bed, where Tinasha was not, in fact, asleep. She was sitting on the mattress, her legs crossed as she brushed the curtains apart. Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes as she said, "I'll hear you out if there's anything you have to say."

Her head was tilted innocently to one side, but her eyes were as cold as ice.

Next to her was another woman who had seemingly appeared from nowhere. Meredina, an officer in the army, drew her sword and fixed her gaze on the intruder.

"Mage Lita, I'd like you to explain just what is going on here," Meredina demanded as she pointed the tip of her sword at the trespasser.

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"The culprit is one of our own mages?" Oscar asked to confirm.

“Most likely,” Tinasha replied swiftly.

Prior to returning to her room, Tinasha had dropped by the study to inform Oscar of the gist of the situation. Her ivory fingers massaged her temples. “I think maseira was the magical poison used to kill that lady-in-waiting. I thought use of it would have died out a long time ago, especially here, so I was surprised to discover that.”

“What do you mean by ‘*especially here*’?” questioned Oscar.

“Maseira has a history in Tuldarr. Four hundred years ago, it was responsible for some serial murders, and the symptoms were about the same as what our casualty here experienced. Immediately, after a victim dies of maseira poisoning, black flecks form on their scalp, but a person’s hair can make that difficult to recognize. There’s also a certain spell one can cast that will eliminate all traces of maseira in the body,” Tinasha explained.

“There’s a potion that can do all that?!” Oscar exclaimed, his eyes growing wide. He had never heard of such a concoction, even from the court mages.

Tinasha gave a faint smile. “There is, indeed. But in exchange, a bit of the spell cast to erase remnants of the toxin will be left over, because that magic is overwriting the maseira. Even then, it’s extremely minute and wouldn’t appear lethal. Thus, anyone examining the body would overlook it. It’s a very crafty method.”

“So if someone used a spell to conceal the poison, that means it had to be a court mage,” concluded Oscar.

“Precisely,” Tinasha affirmed with a nod.

Oscar leaned against the back of his chair and sighed. If Tinasha hadn’t been here, this whole matter would have been written off as simply a mysterious death.

Looking pale, Lazar cut in. “Wh-who would do such a thing?”

“I have a good idea, and I think I’ll know for sure very soon. Earlier, I told the mages that I knew a method for identifying whoever made a magic potion. Our poisoner will come to kill me or take back the samples,” Tinasha said with a bright smile.

Lazar’s jaw dropped. Oscar gave an exasperated exhale. “Are you stupid…?”

“What?!” Tinasha cried, insulted.

“I trusted you and sent you out on this case, and this is what happens. We’re well past giving something a try because it can’t hurt—and into the realm of truly awful ideas,” Oscar commented.

“You’re *really* going to say that to my face?!” Tinasha objected, outraged. Unfortunately, it was true, so she couldn’t offer more of a rebuttal.

With difficulty, Oscar tamped down his desire to lecture her endlessly. “What’s done is done. If the poisoner’s coming tonight, find someone to change places with you.”

“I can’t change places with anyone. My magic is unique, and a mage might notice,” she stated.

“Appoint a guard, then! This is nonnegotiable!” Oscar insisted, his voice raising in reproach.

“Fiiine,” Tinasha said, sulking. The young woman straightened up and held her head high. Judging by her insolent attitude, she was quite possibly used to getting reprimanded. She was like a wicked child.

Internally, she was doubtlessly sticking out her tongue at Oscar. He looked to Tinasha and rested his chin on one hand. Then a question occurred to him. “Wait, if you can identify who made the potion, can’t you just catch them that way?”

“Oh, I actually can’t. There weren’t enough traces of the concoction itself. Instead, I just set a trap,” she answered.

“Wow…,” the prince muttered, at his wit’s end. He had thought Tinasha was hard to get a handle on, but she was even more of a piece of work than anticipated.

What kind of upbringing was responsible for her still behaving this way at her age? Oscar had the distinct feeling he’d end up becoming her plaything. After realizing he was beginning to daydream of Tinasha, he scowled. “Keep your guard up. You’re tracking down a court mage.”

Tinasha’s dark eyes filled with wonder at his hastily added warning, and then she gave a soft smile. “No need to worry. I’m the heir to the throne of Tuldarr.”

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“Wh-what in the…?” Lita sputtered, her face pallid as she stared past the point of Meredina’s sword at the two women opposing her. She glanced at where she had stored the bottles.

It had been a ploy.

Ordinarily, she wouldn’t have allowed herself to be manipulated by some story about being able to identify who concocted a potion. Yet she had trusted it because it had come from the lips of a Tuldarr royal.

Lita ground her teeth in frustration, but she no longer had any time to regret the past. She threw the bottles at Meredina and shouted out an incantation.

“O thing of form, incinerate!”

A gout of flames swirled toward the two women.

Meredina was reaching out to catch the containers but quickly shifted to throwing her arms around Tinasha to shield her. Yet before the fire could reach them, an invisible wall caught it.

In the meantime, Lita turned aside swiftly and tossed a spell at the window to break it. The magical barrier and the pane both blew away, and she leaped out into the night air. Shards of broken glass caught the red glimmer of the flames. Lita used levitation magic to rise up and away.

“Ugh, I’ve failed!”

It had taken a fair bit of effort to infiltrate the castle as a court mage. And now a series of trivial blunders had ruined it all. There was little she could do but make her escape.

Lita called up a transportation spell that would ferry her out of Farsas.

Suddenly, a woman teleported in front of her without making a sound. Her black hair fluttered in the night breeze as she smiled, her lips as red as blood. “I don’t plan to kill you. Please surrender yourself.”

One alabaster hand extended toward Lita, who gasped as she saw the unusual magic held therein.

The disparity between the two was just too great. This wasn’t someone who operated according to the usual methods.

Realizing she couldn’t escape, Lita ended her transportation spell. Instead, she shouted:

“Answer my call, dragons of onyx black! Come forth!”

A gale whipped up. Tinasha held her hair down against the terrible gusts.

Lita broke out in a cruel smile.

Three huge black dragons appeared in the sky above Farsas Castle. The creatures, so inky ebony it was like they could suck up all the moonlight, cut monstrous figures in the sky.

The sound of their breathing was like dull roars. Surrounded by Lita and the trio of dragons, Tinasha gave a little sigh in midair. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen wyverns. Are you a successor to Molcado’s school of magic?”

“He’s our esteemed grand master,” Lita answered.

“A serial killer behind multiple bizarre murders is your…,” Tinasha muttered.

Molcado was the one responsible for the maseira killings during Tinasha’s reign in Tuldarr. At the time, he was indicted on multiple charges of violating taboos. One of these was the contract he had formed with wyverns. Unlike other types of dragons, wyverns loved to slaughter and eat humans indiscriminately, so summoning them was forbidden throughout Tuldarr. However, Molcado had used the wyverns to attack a village, an act that had incurred Tinasha’s wrath. She had brought the wicked man in herself.

However, only a day before he was to be executed, Molcado killed twelve mages and broke out of jail. Tinasha used every possible means to hunt him down, but he had fled the country. Soon after, Tuldarr plunged into war with Tayiri. Amid the upheaval, she had lost track of him.

For her part, Tinasha had hoped that Molcado had died in a ditch somewhere. Evidently, there were successors to both his bloodline and his craft.

Deeply revolted, Tinasha eyed Lita. “I’ll go ahead and say this one more time: Please surrender. I truly would prefer to capture you alive.”

“…You’ve really got some nerve talking like that. Do you not understand the situation you’re in?” Lita asked.

“No. I’ve got eyes. I understand perfectly well,” she replied.

“TINASHA!”

An angry voice tore through the night.

Tinasha flinched.

The cry certainly hadn’t come from Lita. Its sound had risen from directly below.

Fearfully, Tinasha looked down…and saw a man standing on a balcony. The crown prince of Farsas glared at her, his eyes radiating an adamant sense of authority and power. “What are you doing? Get back here!”

“Ugh…”

Apparently, Oscar had heard the sound of the window shattering. Either that or Meredina had fetched him… Regardless, Tinasha was still in her element. No one was more suited than her to handle a battle between mages.

She shouted down to Oscar, “It’s all right! You’re in a dangerous spot right below us, so go back inside! I’ll take care of this quickly!”

“Like hell you will! Get down!” he yelled back instantly.

Tinasha sighed. Why was he getting mad at her and not Lita, the true villain? She didn’t feel at all satisfied…and decided to ignore his order. With a jaunty smile and a wave to him down below, she turned back to face Lita.
“That damn woman!” Oscar grumbled, his face twitching with rage over how Tinasha refused to obey.

Awaiting orders behind Oscar was Meredina, who was already ashen-faced. No wonder the person she was ordered to guard had gotten herself into such a state. It was clearly Tinasha who was in the wrong. What was she going to do on her own against three giant dragons in the sky?

Oscar turned to call for a mage but then remembered something. “Nark, come here.”

Summoned by its master, the little red dragon appeared on the balcony. It let out a happy chirp.

“Can you get bigger?” Oscar asked.

The dragon bowed in assent, then flapped its little wings. As it moved away from the balcony, its shape changed in a flash. It grew to rival the size of any of the black wyverns circling the castle.

When Tinasha realized what was happening, a look of startled dismay came over her face for the first time. “Nark, no! Don’t bring him over!”

“If I’m your owner, you listen to me!” Oscar shouted.

“I said no! You stay where you are!” Tinasha fired back.

Nark’s head swiveled from side to side at these conflicting instructions, but ultimately it decided to follow its master’s command. It let Oscar up on its back and rose into the air.

“Y-you traitor…,” Tinasha muttered, trembling with disbelief.

Lita laughed at her, high and scornful. “What a farce. But this is perfect. It’s not what I had planned, but how brilliant it will be to bury the Akashia swordsman along with the Tuldarr royal! Die here!”

Light substantial enough to overtake the dark of night erupted from Lita’s hand.

At the same time, two wyverns dove toward Tinasha, claws poised to rake her.

It was a fierce, three-pronged attack, yet none of the strikes found purchase.

The darkness-rending light abruptly vanished, and the two wyverns were immobilized, as if a needle were sewing them up.

Tinasha had accomplished all that without so much as an incantation. She cocked her head to one side in confusion. “Why didn’t you run away? Using the wyverns as a decoy and escaping was the best thing you could have done.”

“Wh-what are you…?” sputtered Lita.

“It’s the truth,” said Tinasha, spreading her arms and weaving a spell between them. She sang out the incantation for it.

“I call upon the breath at the origin of all, the droplets that divide life from death. To deny a breath is to deny life itself.”

The magic unfurled in the sky, resembling an elaborately detailed map.

Lita was rendered speechless, not by the magnitude of the spell but by its esoteric design.

Tinasha’s hand shot forward.

“Disintegrate.”

Instantly, the dragons flanking her burst into tiny pieces.

Bits of flesh and dark, sludgy blood rained down on the ground. Lita watched in disbelief. “What…? What are you? Are you a witch?”

“No, although I’m similar to one,” Tinasha admitted after turning back to check on Oscar. She gave a light snap of her fingers and flashed a cruel smile at Lita. “Well, why don’t you give me your best shot? Although, that mighty grand master of yours you spoke of—Molcado—never managed to harm a hair on my head.”

It was a proclamation only the strong could make, ringing through the air clearer than any incantation.

The one remaining black dragon swept down in a spiral toward Nark. As soon as it sucked in a deep inhale, it breathed swelteringly hot red flames right at Oscar.

However, Nark exhaled white fire to meet the attack.

As red and white collided, the castle was illuminated more brightly than in daytime. Swirling hot winds pricked at Oscar’s skin. Holding his arms up to cover his eyes, he commanded, “Nark, can you fly really close past that dragon’s left side?”

The red dragon turned its body to one side in response, zipping right past the left side of the wyvern as it glided toward them.

The wyvern beat its wings, attempting to turn and give swift pursuit, but then it roared in searing pain.

One sharp-clawed arm tumbled into the garden.

Oscar had lopped off the limb by leaping over from Nark's back. With frightening strength and Akashia, he sliced through the wyvern's arm. As the creature raged and writhed, the prince straightened himself up on the wyvern. Kicking off from it once more, he lifted his sword high overhead. "It's time for you to shut up. You're causing too much of an uproar in my castle."

In a fit of fury and pain, the wyvern sucked in air to breathe again. Oscar severed its head before it had the chance, however.

Oscar sheathed Akashia and jumped from the slowly descending wyvern to return to Nark.

"Good job, Nark," Oscar complimented, patting the dragon and praising it for a job well done. Nark trilled happily, and Oscar laughed. He looked over at Tinasha and saw that the other two wyverns were gone already. She really did have the power to back up her words. Lita was floating in front of her, already unconscious.

Tinasha caught his gaze and gave him a cute grin. "You defeated a dragon alone. I suppose I should have expected as much."

"Enough. Just come down," Oscar said irritably.

"I think that goes for both of us…," she remarked, descending back onto the balcony. Several military officers and mages had already rushed over there. They took custody of Lita and hurried to arrest her and get the situation under control.

Oscar also landed on the balcony; Nark shrank back down to its small form and settled on the man's shoulder. As he stroked its head, he fixed a cold gaze on Tinasha. "It looks like you need to be monitored more than guarded."

"I'll help you clean the garden. There's bits of dragon everywhere," Tinasha stated.

"That's not the problem here," Oscar snapped.

A strange tension rose between the pair, and Nark looked from one to the other in bewilderment.

Thus, the culprit behind the murder of a lady-in-waiting was apprehended.

※

"I don't know how to describe her… She's really something," whispered Doan the next day in the study after delivering his report on the aftermath. He had watched the skirmish from the night before from the ground.

Pen in hand, Oscar massaged his temples. "She's a piece of work, all right. *Unpredictable* doesn't even begin to describe it. Is everyone in the Tuldarr royal family so crazy?"

“I think she’s a special case,” answered Doan.

The subject of their conversation was not present. At this hour, Tinasha was likely in her room working on her analysis.

The king and other castle staff members were amazed when they heard about the events of the night before. Surprisingly, the king merely laughed indulgently and said, “She’s something.” This was hardly the sort of escapade to be dismissed so arbitrarily, but everyone was lenient on the guest who had come to break Oscar’s curse.

“Has our culprit said anything?” Oscar asked.

“She’s keeping silent,” Doan informed.

“I wish Tinasha would have told me earlier if she noticed that mage woman messing with the windows.”

“…I didn’t notice, either. I’m very sorry,” apologized Doan.

After Lita was arrested, Tinasha explained that when she, Lita, and Doan went to go look at the windows, Lita had jogged ahead and released the enchantments on the panes. According to Tinasha, she had used magic to refract light in a way that would make people passing by believe they were seeing a shadowy figure outside.

Doan, for his part, was utterly blown away that he hadn’t noticed Lita undoing those spells. And when Lita had asked to be taken off the night shift, that was when Tinasha anticipated she would be paying her a visit later.

Lita herself had only half believed the story about Tinasha being able to identify who had brewed a potion, but because Tinasha had correctly guessed the name of the draught, she’d had no choice but to act.

After getting Oscar to sign the report, Doan sighed. “I wonder what her motive was. Did she have some sort of grudge against that lady-in-waiting?”

“Wasn’t that the reason for the so-called ghost the lady-in-waiting first saw?” posited Oscar.

“So that means…”

“That ghost she saw was probably some associate or other of Lita’s—someone who shouldn’t have been seen,” Oscar surmised. “When Lita found out he was spotted, she killed her and tried to throw everyone off by making it out to be all part of a ghost story. Doesn’t that sound right? Although, it was all for nothing the moment one very irregular woman appeared on the scene.”

“An associate who shouldn’t have been seen…,” Doan muttered in wondering.

“Lita thought it a stroke of luck that she had a chance to take down the swordsman bearing Akashia and a Tuldarr royal in one move. There’s no telling the sinister motives beyond that, though,” said Oscar, his head in his hands over how annoying everything had gotten.

Doan eyed the prince. He thought Oscar was pretty irregular himself for taking down a wyvern alone, even if he’d had a dragon with him. But the

prince didn't seem to be aware of that. All he had done so far was criticize Tinasha for going rogue without talking to anyone about it.

Well aware of the prince's penchant for sneaking out of the castle on a regular basis, Doan thought, *You two are extremely alike…*

He knew he'd incur Oscar's wrath if he said as much to the man himself, of course. Ordinarily, Oscar would just make a face at something like that, but he got weird when Tinasha was involved.

Placing the documents under his arm, Doan bowed. "Well, I'll continue looking into who that shadowy figure was."

"Thanks," Oscar answered, resting his chin in his hands again with a scowl as if recalling something displeasing.

※

After spending the morning using magic to help clean up the garden, Tinasha returned to her room momentarily to summon Mila. The redhead appeared, looking bemused as she knelt before her master. "Lady Tinasha, do you need something?"

"Do you remember Molcado? The guy who caused trouble in Tuldarr four hundred years ago," Tinasha said.

During Tinasha's reign, she had commanded all twelve spirits. Though she only had Mila now, the red-haired spirit girl had been present during Molcado's killing spree.

In a very human gesture, Mila tilted her head to one side as she thought. "Hmmm… Oh, oh, that weirdo! I remember!"

"I want you to look into where he fled to and what he did after he got away," Tinasha instructed.

"Yes, my queen. But why?" asked Mila.

In reply, Tinasha smiled. It was the grin of a monarch who could subdue and conquer all who beheld her expression. "An assassin who is a descendent of Molcado has appeared. This event may hold some relation to other forbidden curses, too. If you discover other cases of mages using wyverns, inform me of their whereabouts."

"As you wish. Oh, but Lady Tinasha, will you be all right alone?" questioned Mila.

"I'll be fine. This era seems reasonably peaceful. Actually, I was surprised to learn that my rule is part of a period now referred to as the Dark Age. I suppose it *was* a brutal time, though," commented Tinasha.

"I'm definitely glad no one is at war now. But, Lady Tinasha, you don't know what kind of people are out there, so be careful when you're alone. No matter how strong you are, you're still the quintessential mage. You'll get hurt if you go up against a super-capable sword fighter or the like!" warned Mila.

"Ah…," Tinasha replied. True, she couldn't really handle close-range combat. Oscar had taught her swordplay when she was a girl, but things got

so hectic once she took charge of Tuldarr that she hadn't been able to keep practicing.

Thinking of many past battles, Tinasha made a face. "All right. I'll set a spell to notify you should I experience massive blood loss."

"Please call me over *before* you suffer massive blood loss," Mila stated in exasperation before she winked out of sight.

The spirit was very adept in matters of investigation. It might take some time, but she would produce results.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Tinasha went back to her bed and flopped onto it with a sigh, staring up at the canopy.

One thing was solved, but now a different issue had popped up. That was just how life was. Listlessly, Tinasha's long eyelashes fluttered closed.

"But…he might hate me now…"

※

After five days of questioning, Lita found a weak spot in the guards' watch and committed suicide.

Thus, any hope of learning who she had been working with, or what her true objective was, vanished into the dark for the time being.

3. Sprouting Glass Wings

"…Ah!"

The girl awoke with a start.

She looked all around her. The room was still dark; it must have been the middle of the night. She used a hand to wipe her sweat-drenched forehead.

As she did, a much larger hand came from next to her and stroked her hair. "What's wrong? Did you have a bad dream?"

"…Oscar," she whispered.

There he was, the man who had suddenly appeared at her window one day. He who claimed to be from four hundred years in the future. Although he was staying with her, it felt like it had been a very long time since she'd seen him. The girl was so overwhelmed she couldn't speak.

She looked down at her small, juvenile body. "I think… I had a weird dream. One where you were gone…"

"What? I'm still here," Oscar said.

"Yeah…"

He was right there with her, as he should be.

So then why did she feel so intensely anxious? Tinasha was unable to extract herself from the dregs of that hazy dream, and Oscar offered her a gentle smile. "It's all right. I'm here. You should go back to sleep."

"Oscar…"

He held his arms open, and Tinasha went to lie down again in his embrace. She closed her eyes, wishing fervently not to lose sight of him even in her dreams. "Stay with me. Don't go anywhere while I'm asleep."

"I won't. You can relax," he assured, patting her back comfortingly, rhythmically. It sounded like a heartbeat, and it lulled Tinasha back into a gentle slumber. She didn't want to sleep; she knew that if she fell unconscious, she would return to that world devoid of him. Unfortunately, Tinasha was powerless to resist the call of exhaustion.

Her eyelids were so heavy she couldn't keep them open, and Oscar whispered something like a lullaby to her. "No matter what happens, I'll protect you."

There was no questioning that he had kept his promise.

Tinasha woke up, alone in her own bed.

※

The lights of the city twinkling from beyond the castle windows were gorgeous.

A dark-bluish blackness tinted the night sky; Tinasha gazed out at the spectacle with some loneliness in her eyes.

The vista was of Tuldarr, her homeland. Nights weren't all that different between countries, but unlike Farsas, Tuldarr had magic lights of every color hanging on the street corners.

Tinasha thought of something and brought her hands together softly, then breathed into them.

When she pulled her fingers apart, a spray of golden light poured from them. All at once, it flowed from the open window into the dark sky. Tinasha watched it go yearningly.

Then a young man spoke from behind her. "What are you doing?"

"The city lights are so beautiful, I thought I'd add a bit of color," she answered, turning around to look at Legis, the prince of Tuldarr. He had light-blond hair and mild features that exuded nobility. Tinasha recalled how Tuldarr's line of succession had changed to follow lineage rather than raw power. A strange mood settled over her.

She was staring at him intently, and Legis smiled. "What is it? Do I have something on my face?"

"No. I was just thinking of how many things have changed," she replied.

Tinasha had returned to Tuldarr to gather up some materials for her curse analysis, but searching for them had taken awhile. In the end, the royals had encouraged her to spend the night.

Since she was there, Tinasha took the chance to explore the palace. Despite its long and storied history, there were quite a few things that had changed in four centuries.

One such difference was that the detached wing she spent her childhood and early adolescence in had been torn down and rebuilt as a true part of the castle. After hearing of this, Tinasha felt an intangible sense of loss.

The ache slowly spreading through her heart did not come from losing the place where she had spent the vast majority of her younger days.

It was because her memories of the all too brief time together with *him* had been there.

Of course, Tinasha could see him again upon returning to Farsas. However, she still held her memories as separate and precious.

"…Nark and I are now the only ones who know who he was…," she muttered, closing her eyes before they could well with tears.

The days she had spent with him four hundred years ago after he appeared out of nowhere were not particularly eventful or lengthy. They

had only lasted as long as they did because it took that long to rescue her. Had Tinasha listened and left Tuldarr with him right away, he likely would have vanished sooner.

He had managed to stay with her right up until she had faced certain tragedy. If that wasn't luck, then what was?

Tinasha remembered that after he had vanished, and she dragged herself back to her room, she had found Nark and burst into tears. Nark wasn't the one to use the magical orb, and the dragon had escaped being erased because it was separate from Oscar, its master. Oscar had left Nark for Tinasha, now that she was alone.

This dragon that Oscar had brought with him from far in the future was now the sole witness to a lost story. Nark would never speak a word of it, however, and Tinasha didn't mind that.

Tinasha suddenly remembered where she was and forced a smile. "It's very strange to be in a different time. I was talking with Mila about how my own era is now called the Dark Age."

"I imagine it was given that name because it was a period of horrific wars. Fortunately, Tuldarr survived and endures to this day. That's thanks to you," Legis replied.

"You give me too much credit. I was only queen for five years," Tinasha pointed out.

"Even so, you've survived for four hundred years in a magic sleep. While that's possible in theory, I can only count on one hand the number of mages capable of accomplishing that," said Legis.

"Surely that's because not many people would think to attempt it. If you don't have a solid objective in mind when making the attempt, you'll only wind up lost," Tinasha explained, with some degree of internal self-derision.

A solid objective. Did she have even one?

All Tinasha had was her feelings for *him*.

How much had she wished to grab his hand on that night long ago when he vanished? She had elected to spend four hundred years waiting to get ahold of him again.

What sort of cruel trick of fate was this to give someone like that the throne for a second time?

Tinasha's emotions were strong and complicated as she gazed back at Legis. She decided to ask him directly about something that had been on her mind. "Forgive me for prying, but do you not have any resentment toward me because the throne returned to me once I awoke?"

Had things gone as planned, Legis, an only child and crown prince, would have become the next king. Naturally, he grew up expecting and preparing for that eventuality. How did he feel about Tinasha snatching that away from him?

For a moment, Legis's eyes grew wide and round. Then he gave a gentle smile. "I didn't have that much interest in ruling to begin with. If the

mystical spirits are the symbols of Tuldarr, then it's only natural that one who has inherited them should run the country."

"I…see," Tinasha replied.

"To say nothing of who you are. I have no complaints at all. If you're preoccupied thinking about your coronation, I'd like it if you took an interest in me instead," Legis admitted frankly.

Tinasha gave a faint smile, gleaning that his intent was for her to fret less than she needed to. She was aware that, as someone who had come from so far away, she was different from the rest of them. Tinasha had accepted that from the outset. It wasn't as if she had done all this to be loved by Oscar. She was here to help him.

She wouldn't become the wife he had lost. Instead, Tinasha focused on what she was capable of.

Tinasha smiled as she thought back on the distant past.

The beautiful, slightly sad expression on her face was as anxious as a child's.

※

As he put a stack of documents for the upcoming Festival of Aetea into order, Oscar rubbed at his tight shoulders.

He managed to get outside for exercise every so often, but since the former prime minister—his uncle—passed away, and Oscar took over his work, things had been particularly busy. Oscar's father had never liked paperwork to begin with, and he happily foisted all that onto his son. While the prince did think of it as good experience, it was occasionally irritating.

What's more, he had recently acquired a new source of ire.

The beautiful princess Oscar had brought back from Tuldarr seemed to be deliberately avoiding him, probably because she had angered him during the wyvern incident the other day.

While Oscar did tend to lose his patience whenever he interacted with this woman he couldn't get a handle on, he felt equally offended that she was avoiding him. Yesterday, she had even gone back to Tuldarr to fetch some books.

"If Tinasha doesn't want to see me, she can just stay in Tuldarr," he muttered despite himself, then scowled once he heard his own words.

He had plenty of things he wished to say to her, but considering their positions, he couldn't be too harsh. At the moment, Tinasha was the only one who could fight back against the witch's curse.

If Oscar could at least get to know Tinasha better, he might be able to tolerate her behavior. Unfortunately, she was making no efforts to reveal her hand.

Oscar remembered the darkness in her eyes—those beautiful orbs like something out of a dream. They vexed him, as if Tinasha were always gazing at a thing no one else could see.

He had a vague idea as to why her eyes bothered him so much, but he was purposely trying not to think about that. He was better off not going anywhere near that. It suited him just fine to draw a line between them, especially since she was a princess from a foreign country.

Just then, there was a knock at the door, and Lazar came in. “Your Highness, is now a good time?”

“What is it?” Oscar asked.

“We’ve received a petition from the shop owners in the south of the city. Apparently, someone has splattered animal blood on the streets. With the festival coming up, they want us to step up our patrols.”

“Another weird incident, huh? We’ve got a lot of people coming in and out of the country right now, so we’d best launch an investigation while we’re at it. I hope this is just a prank, because it could get annoying otherwise,” groused Oscar.

“Wh-what reason could there be for doing something like that other than a joke?” asked Lazar.

“Who knows? Maybe someone’s getting harassed,” Oscar proposed, tossing out a random guess. However, Lazar left the room looking as if he himself were the one being harassed.

Left alone, Oscar rested his chin in one hand. “…Should I have the mages look into this?”

Non-mages wouldn’t have a good idea of what was likely to be magic-related. Considering that one of the biggest festivals of the year was quickly approaching, stamping out anything even remotely suspicious was prudent.

As Oscar wrote out some additional documents, he thought of Tinasha again.

Maybe her dark eyes reflected something other people couldn’t understand.

If she joined the investigation, would she uncover something?

Despite those musings, Oscar finished scribing the official form without asking anything of the woman.

※

One week after returning from Tuldarr, Tinasha’s life had become a series of round trips between her room and the lecture halls.

Overall, she was making fair progress on the curse analysis, though it was far from rapid. If this pace kept up, she might finish before the half year she had been allotted.

At the same time, she was laboring to fill in the four-hundred-year gap in her magical knowledge via a series of books and lessons. This educational journey, which was akin to bounding through time periods, brought color to Tinasha’s everyday life. If not for Oscar’s curse, she might have spent every waking moment holed up in the library.

One day, Tinasha had attended a lecture on introductory magic as she often did. She was getting up from her seat once it ended when a woman next to her called out.

"Excuse me, but I heard that you could identify the maker of a magic potion. Is that true?" asked a blond woman named Sylvia, looking keen with interest.

Tinasha smiled and confirmed, "It's true. You might find others in Tuldarr capable of it, too. The spell is difficult, however, so it's not easy to teach."

Sylvia let out a sigh of wonder, her eyes taking on a faraway, spellbound glaze. "I'd like to go and study in Tuldarr someday, but it's pretty hard… Um, whenever you're free, could you tell me more about it?"

"Of course, if you're all right with that," Tinasha said, giving ready consent.

Sylvia's eyes sparkled, and immediately she fired two or three questions at Tinasha. Based on the nature of the inquiries, Tinasha inferred that Sylvia was an exceptionally creative magic user. On top of her abilities as a court mage, she had a flexible inventiveness that was fascinating. Impressed, Tinasha answered all the other woman's questions.

Once she'd had her fill, Sylvia broke into a friendly grin. "By the way, Princess Tinasha, what are you going to do at the festival?"

"Huh? What festival?" Tinasha said cluelessly.

Sylvia's eyes grew wide. "Oh, that's right, Tuldarr is an atheist country. In Farsas, we have a big celebration in reverence to our major god, Aetea! It's held citywide, and everyone in the castle has been very busy making preparations for a while now! It's in three days!"

"Very busy…? I had no idea…," Tinasha muttered.

"Oh, and because of all the work that goes into the festival, there's no lectures starting tomorrow," Sylvia informed.

"I was about to be the only one to show up!" Tinasha exclaimed, feeling embarrassed at the very idea.

As Tinasha covered her flushed cheeks, Sylvia gave her an innocent grin. "Since you'll be here for it, why don't you enjoy the festivities and look around at all the celebration has to offer? Truthfully, I'd love to show you around myself, but I was suddenly put on the patrol roster…"

"Suddenly? Did someone trade shifts?" Tinasha asked.

"No. A few days ago, a person scattered blood in a deserted alley, and they still haven't caught whoever's responsible. I hope it's only a prank. Still, just to be safe, mages were requested to go on patrol," explained Sylvia.

"…Is that because it might be related to a forbidden curse?" Tinasha muttered, her voice going an octave lower.

However, Sylvia didn't notice. "A long time ago, apparently that sort of thing happened a lot. Like people using animal blood to contaminate magical arrays before using them…"

“That doesn’t have any significant effect. What *does* get problematic is if someone like that escalates to using humans for catalysts,” remarked Tinasha.

The type of magic known as a forbidden curse universally involved sacrificing people and bringing about calamity.

The Dark Age in particular, a time when human lives were considered trivial, saw a disgusting number of attempts at forbidden curses. Thus, Tuldarr labored to cull the use of these curses.

Tinasha smiled, her dark eyes narrowing. “Call for me if anything happens. I’ll be right there.”

“What? This isn’t so serious that we need to bother! …I hope it’s not anyway…,” Sylvia said, ducking her head awkwardly. She was likely remembering the recent murder case.

“Well… I *am* interested in the festival, but I’ll stay home in the castle. I think a certain someone will get mad at me if I go out,” Tinasha stated, cowering as she recalled Oscar’s offended expression.

The two of them burst out laughing at the same time.

※

The day of the celebration, Oscar finished all his work by dusk for once.

While he knew another mountain of post-festival reports would pile up once it was over, he was free for now.

In the past, he often sneaked out of the castle and went to have fun in town. But now that he was an adult, the novelty of that had worn off. In general, he didn’t venture off, nor even arrange for guards.

The prince left his study and headed for his chamber to kill some time. On the way, he caught sight of someone on a balcony looking out at the city.

Her long black hair fluttered in the wind. It felt like it had been a while since he’d seen her pale complexion and rare beauty.

The look in her eyes as she gazed into the distance hadn’t changed since the first time he’d met her. Yet now there was a sort of childlike, pure yearning there.

Tinasha looked like a girl who grew up locked in a castle, pining for the outside world. As he stole glances at her from the side, Oscar hesitated for a fraction of an instant. Or perhaps it only felt like he did.

Detouring to head out onto the balcony, he tapped her shoulder. “Do you want to go out into town?”

Tinasha gave a start, looking at him. Amazement filled her eyes. “Ah, er… I wouldn’t mind, but it’s pleasant enough watching from here.”

“Oh? So you do? Don’t deprive yourself, then. Come along,” Oscar insisted curtly, striding back out into the hallway and setting off. His gait was much faster than Tinasha’s, owing to his tall height, and she had to jog to catch up with him.

“Ah, um…,” she stammered.

“Keep up. If we get separated, you won’t be able to get back,” he declared imperiously.

“Where exactly are we going?!” Tinasha cried, nevertheless persuaded into running after him.

The day of the Aetea festival was a special holiday in Farsas. People from all over the country, and even some from others, gathered in the city. Everyone was savoring the festive atmosphere, singing, drinking, and dancing. Confetti rained down from the roofs of the merchant shops lining the streets, brilliant against the blue sky.

The din itself was enough to get anyone feeling giddy and intoxicated. A young mother holding tight to her toddler son’s hand made her way along the moat that rimmed the castle. She checked on her child many times along the way, but a crowd of people suddenly bumped into her, and she stumbled. All too quickly, she lost the grip on her boy’s hand.

“Oh…,” she said, letting out a little cry. Now that he was set free, her son tore off in high spirits. The blood drained from her face as she watched him. The woman knew she had to catch him fast, but there were so many people that she couldn’t get through the crowd swiftly. She managed to catch a glimpse of him through a gap in a wave of revelers—and spied him peering into the moat.

She opened her mouth to shout his name, but just then, a passing drunkard bumped into the boy, and his tiny body toppled over toward the moat.

“NO!” the woman shrieked, but a young man was already reaching for the child.

He stretched out his hand and pulled the boy up. The mother rushed over and gathered him to her. “Th-thank you so much!”

“Be careful out there,” the young man cautioned before taking his leave. As she watched him go, the woman cocked her head, feeling a strange sense that she had seen him somewhere before.

Oscar weaved his way rapidly through the crowds, and Tinasha watched him as she followed. “Oscar, is this really okay?”

“My work is done, so it’s fine,” he answered.

Both had changed into more casual clothes, and they zipped through the throngs. All around them, people were riding high on festival excitement, so no one paid them any mind. That said, some people could probably recognize who he was if they looked closely.

The heir to the throne had sneaked out of the castle with Tinasha in tow. Oscar suddenly stopped and bought some pastries from a nearby street stall. They were made by mixing flour and water, then adding sliced fruit to the dough and baking it. They were only seen in Farsas on holidays. Oscar handed her one wrapped in paper and said, “Here, try this.”

“…Thank you,” Tinasha replied, taking a bite. The sweet yet sour tang of the sugary glaze coating the exterior melted on her tongue. It had a delicious, unfamiliar flavor, and she broke into a pure, natural smile.

Oscar stared at Tinasha while she grinned so innocently. Eventually, she felt his gaze on her and looked from the pastry, confused. “What is it? Don’t tell me this was some sort of trap?”

“What would I have to gain by setting a trap for you?” he retorted dryly.

“A distraction from the worries of daily life, maybe…”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’d love to, but unfortunately you’re a royal from our neighboring country,” Oscar reminded.

“I’m very sorry about that. You’ll have to wait for your next chance,” Tinasha stated placidly, then took another bite of her pastry. She carried the status of a royal and could overwhelm opponents with her mage abilities, yet at this moment, she was an ordinary girl. Her looks, personality, and powers were all out of balance.

Oscar’s impression of Tinasha was ever-changing, and he found himself unable to look away from her. Suddenly, the prince snapped back to his senses and frowned.

Initially, he took her from the castle purely because he wished to show a foreign guest around the city. He also wanted to demonstrate his gratitude and provide her with a break, considering all the work she put in regularly toward undoing his curse. There was nothing more to it, really. At least, there shouldn’t have been.

“Let’s get going. I’ll give you a tour,” Oscar said, offering a hand. It was all merely basic courtesy, but a smile rapidly bloomed on Tinasha’s face. She took his hand excitedly, not bothering to hide her pure affection for him in her gaze. The young woman’s elation left Oscar considerably disconcerted.

However, he tamped down those emotions and set off, matching Tinasha’s walking pace. She practically skipped along at his side, munching on her pastry.

With such a beautiful woman in tow amid the bustling crowds, Oscar undoubtedly made the ideal customer for the stall owners. He brushed off the calls and cries from the stands they passed and continued along until he stopped in front of a booth selling hair ornaments. “Would you like me to buy you anything?”

The question had come purely from impulse. Tinasha wore a Tuldarr mage’s robe day in, day out, and Oscar never saw any jewelry on her. She looked lovely anyway, of course, but he did desire to view her in something different every once in a while, for variety’s sake. There could be no admitting to that, however, for he knew Tinasha would suggest they get married if he did.

Tinasha’s eyes grew very wide at his fickle curiosity… But right away, she gave a self-effacing shake of her head. “Thank you. But you’re already doing so much for me daily, so it’s really enough just that you’ve taken me out to see the city.”

She had no greed at all; that was evident in her statement. Yet Oscar noticed that, at the same time, she squeezed his hand a little tighter.

It was likely an unconscious action. As Tinasha walked next to him, she let slip a sigh of relief.

What could she be worrying about, even though she was such a powerful mage? Sometimes she looked as uneasy as a lost child. And the worst part was that she didn't appear to be aware of it at all. If you asked, she'd just smile and say, "I'm fine."

Oscar watched her with narrowed eyes, but she remained unawares and partook of the festival sights. Suddenly, Tinasha seemed to remember something, and her eyes widened. "Oh, but if you're going to grant me a request, could we go see this place I heard about?"

"From who? Where?" Oscar questioned. There were lots of famous spots in the Farsas castle city, including gorgeous fountains and a white bell that was rumored to grant wishes. Oscar envisioned many such places a girl would love to visit.

Tinasha flushed, looking a little shy. "The place where animal blood got splattered."

"…"

With great difficulty, Oscar stayed calm and *didn't* yell the outraged retort that was on the tip of his tongue. He only asked tersely, "Why do you want to go see a place like that?"

"I heard they didn't catch whoever did it and have been patrolling the area. I want to check if there are any tracks left, just to be sure," she answered.

"That's not your job," he stated flatly.

"But it's bothering me!" she protested stubbornly.

Tinasha really was a handful and a half. There was nothing more annoying than accompanying her.

But since he was the one who took her out of the castle, he should take responsibility for it. "…Fine. It's nearby."

"Thank you!"

"Also, you're really a disappointment as a woman," Oscar added.

"Where did that come from?! Is *that* your way of distracting yourself?" exclaimed Tinasha, but the prince ignored her. Unusual though her request was, she could pick up on a clue of some kind if she got a look at the crime scene. If this would satisfy her for the moment, then fine.

Oscar led Tinasha along and turned the corner into the alley. Not many people were hanging around this back street lined with back doors, though the buzz from the festival was still audible. Oscar lifted a casual hand to the soldier on guard at one end of the alley. "Has anything happened?"

"Y-Your Highness?! No, nothing in particular," answered the flustered soldier, glancing curiously at the woman accompanying his crown prince. She paid the guardsman no mind, however, slipping past him.

Tinasha stopped before the spot covered in black stains and looked all around. "Is this it? It does seem to be spread pretty widely around for a prank."

“Based on the volume of blood, they think about two horses or cows were used,” Oscar informed her.

“It’d be difficult to bring those in…,” Tinasha mused, staring at the ground. Oscar could tell she was concentrating from the way her pupils dilated like a cat’s. People passing by paused to gawk out of curiosity, and those living in the houses nearby popped their heads out of windows.

More and more folks started to loiter, causing a scowl to mar Oscar’s fine features as he leaned against the wall. He kept feeling eyes on him. His escape from the castle might need to come to an end soon.

Just as he was straightening up, Tinasha glanced over at him. “Thank you for taking me, but there’s nothing here.”

“Nothing? Really?”

“Nothing, magically speaking. I’m sorry I caused you some trouble,” the young woman reported, trotting back over. It occurred to Oscar that Tinasha might be tricking him like last time, but it didn’t seem that way. The guard soldiers bowed to their prince as he and his guest exited the alley to plunge back into the heart of the festival.

As they navigated the crowds, Tinasha asked, “Why do you think someone did that?”

“It was likely just a prank. We’ve got no other clues that suggest otherwise. Besides, now that I’ve seen it in person, I realize it happened pretty far down that alley,” Oscar answered.

“There *are* people who do strange things. Maybe it was someone who has an uncommon obsession with animal blood,” proposed Tinasha.

“I really don’t like the idea of a guess like that, so knock it off. Anyway, let me show you around some more. If you’re going to be queen, you need to get a proper tour of your neighbor’s capital city.”

“I appreciate the gesture, but I do wonder how you’re so familiar with the town. I thought that, in general, royalty almost never left the castle. Do you regularly sneak out of—? Ouch!” Tinasha cried, annoyed as Oscar tugged lightly at her cheek.

Tinasha had hit the nail on the head, but Oscar went on as if she hadn’t asked anything. “Since we’re already here, I’ll take you to the lookout tower. The view’s great from there.”

Ever since he was a kid, Oscar had climbed the lookout tower on the ramparts at the edge of town whenever he wanted to be alone.

Looking out from there gave him the fleeting sensation of freedom, while also reaffirming the importance of the burdens laid on his shoulders.

An ordinary woman probably wouldn’t think anything of it, but Tinasha was a fellow political policymaker, so she might have had a different impression. Oscar glanced over and saw her gazing up at the paper birds flying through the sky. She turned to smile at him. The expression was so radiant it overtook the light of the sun. “I can’t wait to see it. Thank you.”

Her voice was as clear as bells tinkling, laced with a sense of ephemeral independence.

Come three hours later, Oscar had shown her the highlights of the city. At some point, night had fallen. Magic lights twinkled in the distance, illuminating the castle as seen from the lookout tower.

Tinasha hung out from a stone window, gazing down at the glow pouring from the townscape. “Wow. It’s like the city is overlaid with a fabric made of light.”

“I’m glad you’re having fun, but don’t fall,” Oscar warned.

“If I fell, I’d just fly. I’m fine,” she asserted.

Oscar thought of tugging on her cheek again but unfortunately couldn’t reach. For her part, Tinasha was still absorbed with taking in the glittering nightscape. Just as Oscar decided he should retrieve her, a soldier called to him. “Your Highness, we have a barrel of wine here for the festivities. Please have some if you’d like.”

“Ah, thanks,” said Oscar. A barrel of wine and some glasses were set out on a nearby table. He picked up a glass and asked the woman with her head still stuck out the window, “Do you want some?”

“I *can* drink, but my magic goes the tiniest bit haywire if I get drunk,” she answered.

“Got it. No wine for you,” Oscar responded. There was no way Tinasha’s “*tiniest bit*” was actually tiny in any sense. If she slipped up, she might cause an incident much worse than spilled animal blood.

Giving up on offering her a drink, Oscar came to stand next to her instead. “You’ve been staring out there nonstop. Is it really that fascinating? What’s different from a vista in Tuldarr?”

“A lot… But this is my first time looking out over a city from this close. So many people are living their lives right in front of my eyes… Thinking about that is so moving, and it has a sobering effect,” Tinasha explained.

“…”

She looked utterly innocent as Oscar beheld her. Yet at the same time, there was an undeniable weight and dignity of a royal on the throne in her eyes. Oscar sighed, unable to comprehend the duality, and swallowed the emotions that he himself couldn’t distinguish. “We should get back. Everyone’s going to worry.”

“You’re right. Thank you so much for taking me around. It was very fun,” Tinasha said, grinning at the prince with a heart-melting smile.

Her jet-black eyes were enough to captivate anyone; Oscar narrowed his own and averted his gaze, feeling that he shouldn’t look at her head-on. “So long as you had fun, I’m satisfied. Although, I really didn’t expect us to go look at the bloodstained alley.”

“Why not?! Anyone would be curious about that! It’s so obviously a fishy story, especially after someone suspicious was just sighted on castle premises! I’m not going to be able to rest until I figure out their goal,” declared Tinasha.

“Goal?”

An uneasy feeling suddenly gripped Oscar.

It was like he had something undigested deep within him. He knew this sensation well. Apprehensiveness welled up, sending the prince's mind whirling. "But there weren't any magical traps or anything, were there?"

"No, but spilling that much blood around clearly took planning. If their aim was just to get attention, that's fine. However, it could be something more, and not knowing if that's the case makes it challenging to act," Tinasha reasoned. She had a point. Whatever the culprit's motive was, they had only created a situation where everyone was on edge and extra-cautious—possibly for no reason.

But if these exact circumstances were part of the culprit's plan, then they were waiting for…

"…Are they after me?" Oscar muttered. The instant after he did, a white light flared up at the corner of his eyes.

It came from a little bell tower in the middle of the city. The moment he realized the underside of the bell was glowing, he picked up Tinasha in his arms.

"Get down!"

At his shout, the soldiers behind them rushed to crouch.

Immediately after, the light that flew in burst open against the window. The heat emanating from it singed Oscar's neck.

However, nothing more came for them. Tinasha's voice was muffled as she spoke up from within his arms. "Oscar… What was that? I set up a barrier right away, but…"

"So you're the one who guarded against it. We were just shot at. I'm glad you're safe," the prince replied.

"That magic just now was meant for us?"

"Probably whoever spilled all that animal blood. They were on the lookout close to the crime scene watching for me to show up," Oscar explained grimly.

While the crown prince was ordinarily inside the castle, if some bizarre incident occurred, chances were very high that Oscar would investigate it personally. That was due to his personality and—more than anything—because he was the master of Akashia. Until today, he'd been too busy preparing for the festival to do anything but send the mages out to guard. After lying in wait for Oscar to make an appearance, the culprit must have tailed him.

With Tinasha still in his arms, Oscar fixed a sharp eye on the tower that the attack came from. "It doesn't look like they're going to shoot again… Did they get away?"

"I won't let them," Tinasha declared in a shockingly cold voice. She slipped easily from his arms and had one foot up on the window frame before Oscar grabbed her by the collar.

The young woman was so light that she was well on her way to toppling backward. "Ah!"

“Why are you like this? Don’t go straight to luring them out!” Oscar scolded.

“B-but…,” Tinasha protested as he supported her back so she wouldn’t fall. With one hand rubbing at her tense neck, her other hand pointed outside the window.

“Mark it with a seal.”

As she spoke, a little red line shot through the air. It headed right for the tower’s belfry, then dispersed like a ghostly specter.

Oscar commanded the guards behind him, “The belfry on the three-story tower in the southern district. A mage is there, so be careful.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” the soldiers chorused, rushing off. Oscar steadied Tinasha upright.

After glaring out the window, she gave a little shake of her head and then faced him with her head cocked like a kitten’s. “It’s just for a short time, but I set up automatic tracking and prohibited any teleporting away. If the guards make it in time, they might be able to catch the culprit.”

“You can do that?”

“It’s simple. That said, it’s still likely that the felon will escape. They chose a long-range attack, which means they already have an established getaway plan,” she explained.

“Probably, yeah. Driving them away is a good start, however,” Oscar said.

Tinasha made a face. “I don’t think so at all. In cases like this, you have to chase them down as far as you can and stamp out the issue entirely.”

“Did you grow up in the Dark Age or something?”

The young woman’s cheeks were all puffed up with anger, and Oscar patted her on the shoulder. “Come on, calm down. We’re going back to the castle. Although, it’ll take a while because the streets are so crowded.”

“…That doesn’t matter. I’ll take us back,” Tinasha declared, reaching out to place an ivory hand on Oscar’s cheek before reciting a short incantation.

Oscar looked down at himself; nothing had changed. “What did you do?”

“I applied a glamour, because I think we’ll get scolded if anyone finds us.”

Tinasha took the prince’s hand and sat down on the window ledge. Oscar was about to ask what she was doing when their bodies suddenly lifted up lightly into the air. Once they slipped out the window of the watchtower, they floated even higher, only stopping when they were high enough to look down at the spire.

Dumbfounded, Oscar gazed at the townscape below. “Amazing.”

“It seems like you’re comfortable with heights. Let’s fly back,” Tinasha said, and her words appeared to be the cue for them to start gliding along. The lights of the city glittered like glass beads inlaid in black silk.

Pressing down her hair as the wind tossed it, Tinasha looked fondly from one light to the next.

By her side, Oscar gazed intently down at the same view.

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Oscar directed Tinasha to the balcony outside his chamber, where the two touched down. The door was locked, but they woke Nark, who let them in.

After dropping off Oscar, Tinasha lingered for a while on the balcony, gazing at him as he stood by his bed. When he turned around and caught sight of the somewhat lonely look on her face, he scowled. “What’s with that expression?”

“…I thought you hated me,” she admitted.

“I do.”

“Urgh, I knew it,” grumbled Tinasha, shoulders slumping with dejection.

Oscar boggled at her. Why was she asking him something so obvious? If it was enough to upset her this much, maybe she should reflect on her actions.

Looking away, the prince began to doff his jacket. “I hate that you act on your own without telling me anything. I don’t know if I can trust you, and I feel uneasy looking at you. If you’re so confident…and if you don’t want me to hate you, then open up a bit more.”

At the end of the day, Tinasha had yet to reveal anything about herself.

Why had she been asleep underneath the castle, and why had Oscar’s arrival roused her?

He didn’t know why she had become the next queen of Tuldarr—or the true extent of her power. And yet she kept trying to fly off somewhere, as she had just shown. Feeling fond of such a mysterious, inscrutable woman was all but impossible.

That was much too rude to say to Oscar’s honored guest from a neighboring country, of course. If his words ended up offending her, international relations might very well break down on the spot. With a sigh, Oscar bit back all he wished to lay plain.

Tinasha, on the other hand, beheld him with surprise. “I wasn’t attempting to conceal anything… But I did fail to mention it. I’m sorry.”

Bitterness tinged her voice. When Oscar turned around, he saw that Tinasha had come inside and shut the door to the balcony. Then she straightened her posture, faced him formally, and reintroduced herself.

“My name is Tinasha As Meyer Ur Aeterna Tuldarr. I was born four hundred years ago…and I woke up in this era after a magic sleep. I was queen once before.”

“…What?” was all Oscar could say at this revelation out of the blue. But he quickly realized who she was. “You’re the Witch Killer Queen?!”

“Apparently I have been called that, yes,” she admitted, somewhat self-deprecatingly.

It was all too ridiculous of a tale. Everything fit together when he thought about it, however.

Tuldarr's treatment of the woman, her confidence, her power—all of it aligned with a queen so mighty she was remembered centuries later. When Calste received Oscar at Tuldarr Castle, he had said no one had been invited or allowed beyond that door in a very long time. Still, Oscar would never have imagined that referred to a time span of four hundred years.

Yet, after he cleared away his wrong impressions and assumptions, it all became clear. Angry with himself that he hadn't realized the truth all this time, Oscar's face twisted bitterly. "…I understand."

"I'm really sorry," Tinasha offered, her slender body shrinking back a bit. She looked like a scolded child. Witnessing her as such cut a strange contrast with her more imperial traits.

With a deliberate shift in attitude, Oscar sat down on the bed and looked up at his guest ruefully. "I understand, but don't go running off on your own to do dangerous things. You can rely on me."

His message was succinct, and it signaled a simple and clear end to the conversation.

But Oscar didn't miss the way Tinasha's eyes turned very hollow upon hearing that—or the way they soon filled with a heartrending sorrow. All at once, she was watching something distant.

It was those eyes of hers that kept nagging at the prince, the orbs she turned on him from time to time.

Looking at them felt like a thousand little knives piercing his heart. He averted his gaze. "Stop it with that look in your eyes. It gives me the creeps."

"Wha…?"

"You're always peering through me to the other side. It's rude, and it makes me uncomfortable. If you're going to look at me, look at *me*," he insisted.

Tinasha's eyes would glimpse some place that wasn't quite here. Oscar had caught her like that multiple times since they met. The young woman's beautiful dark eyes would be trained on something just past him.

While her attention and her heart seemed to be present, they weren't.

What would be the point of getting to know someone like that?

Now that he'd laid things bare, Oscar wanted to slap his forehead for his tactlessness.

Those were his true and unvarnished feelings, but it brought him no benefit at all to confess them out loud. Still, he'd said it anyway because he understood Tinasha wasn't aware of her expression.

When he glanced over at her, he saw that she looked as vacant and helpless as a lost child. "Oh…"

After several moments of appearing stupefied, Tinasha tried to smile and failed. Her red lips only twisted crookedly.

"I-I'm sorry…," she muttered, covering her face with one hand. Her eyes were squeezed shut, but tears dripped out of their corners.

Upon witnessing this shift in behavior, Oscar wanted to beseech the heavens. He hadn't meant to criticize Tinasha, but of course she took it that way.

Tinasha bit her lip hard, ashamed of her tears.

Unfortunately, she couldn't stanch the flow. Finally, she broke into quiet sobs, as if what she had held back unconsciously was bursting forth from her.

As she cried silently, Oscar watched her with a sour face. "What is even going on here…?"

He shouldn't have brought it up after all. This must be a part of her she kept very close to her soul, without being aware of it—some sort of incredibly soft and childish emotion. For someone else to point it out was going much too far.

Yet even so, Tinasha had always looked so lonely when she turned that faraway, almost nostalgic gaze on him.

Thus, Oscar had wanted her to feel like she could smile more freely, without all the shadows over her expression.

With an inward groan over how much of a pain this was, Oscar beckoned her over. "Come here."

Timidly, Tinasha trotted before him. He took her hand and pulled her onto his lap. "Seriously, what is going on? Is it something you can't discuss with others?"

The young woman shook her head furiously, then wiped her tears and smiled at him.

That grin was very childlike and oddly adorable—at odds with her mature beauty.

Once Tinasha composed herself, she stared at her hands. "I told you a little bit about it before, but when I was young, someone saved my life. Yet by doing so…he ended up losing his past and future—everything. Even knowing that would happen, he saved me. And I…can't do anything to pay him back for that."

"Is he similar to me?" Oscar guessed.

Tinasha nodded.

It was like listening to a child tell a story. A part of Tinasha's heart must have still been juvenile. That was why her eyes kept searching around for the person she lost. She knew that the past was just that, but she still longed for days long gone.

"I didn't realize I was looking at you like that… I'm sorry. I guess, in the end, I haven't changed. I didn't get even the tiniest bit stronger…" Tinasha sighed into her knees.

Very sullenly, Oscar grabbed a cloth folded up next to him and started to scrub roughly at her face. "I get what happened, but that's no reason to stay stuck in the past. If this person saved your life, then you need to make full use of it. Hold your head up high and look straight ahead."

"…Oscar," she murmured, staring right at him. A weary frown cast a shadow on his fine features.

The prince looked identical to the man who had rescued her, but his expressions were entirely different. That made sense, since he was a different person. He handed Tinasha the cloth he'd wiped her face with, and she stared down at it.

It was only slightly soaked with tears and still fresh.

She curled her hands into the soft cloth. "I'm sorry… It really is as you say."

"Honestly," Oscar muttered, patting her on the head before climbing onto the bed. No report on the sharpshooter had come in yet, which meant it would be tomorrow before they had the full picture. Until then, it would be best to grab some sleep.

Once the prince had gone to lie down, a wave of exhaustion rolled over him, and he sighed out deeply. Everything with Tinasha took far more out of him than working at his desk did. He understood he was paying her more attention than he needed to, but he still ended up doing so.

Rolling over on the bed, Oscar noticed Tinasha was staring at him, at loose ends.

He debated whether he should say something, and in the end caught up one lock of her long black hair. "Well… It'd be impossible for you to fix something like that right away, even if I told you to, so just work on it a little at a time."

Though it wasn't a notion Tinasha could accept immediately, she could digest it bit by bit. That was probably what the person who saved her would want. He would want her to grow to adulthood and live a happy life.

Tinasha gazed at him with wide-open eyes. Her black eyelashes—the same color as her hair—quivered. Uneasily, nervously, she tugged his sleeve. "Oscar."

"What?"

Backlit in the dark of the room, her eyes wavered with hazy emotions. Whenever he looked into those windows to the abyss, he felt as if he could fall headlong into them; he shut his eyes against them.

Then he heard her whisper in his ear, "Can I stay with you, just for tonight?"

"What?!" he yelped, bolting upright in his shock over her unanticipated request.

Her eyes, as transparent as before, bored into him. "Just for this one night, let me be near you. If I do… I think I'll be all right…"

Her words were sincere; her tone beseeching.

Oscar had a brief notion that there was a lost child pulling on his sleeve; he felt a headache coming on. He was exhausted, and everything was quickly getting very aggravating. Sighing, he pulled Tinasha up onto the bed, not wanting to be bothered any further. The prince threw her down next to him as if he were flinging a cat. "Do whatever you want."

“Thank you,” she muttered, lying facedown on the bed and smiling to herself.

She was acting utterly defenseless, and Oscar tossed her a cold glance. “I could have my way with you now, you know.”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha. That’s true; I’m not a kid anymore… Go right ahead,” she invited, her giggle like bells pealing. For someone who wasn’t a kid, she was giving him quite the childlike, carefree gaze.

Oscar rolled his eyes before leveling a glare at her. She was toying with him, any way you looked at it, and it was downright infuriating.

He poked her head irritably. “Enough. Go to sleep. You’re behaving like a child.”

“Okay…,” Tinasha replied, closing her eyes obediently.

Oscar spent some time observing her. After making sure she wasn’t going to start crying again and that her breathing had evened out, he gently stroked her glossy black locks.

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She would never reach the man she met that day.

However, he had his own version of her with him.

And those two no longer existed. Tinasha and this Oscar were here now instead.

It was a new story.

Chasing traces of the old one wouldn’t do. She would keep him as a memory and shut him away.

All that remained was to stand on her own, full of gratitude for the life he gave her.

She would hold her head up high.

Now that she had awakened, she would turn to a new page.

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The next morning, Tinasha jolted from her slumber when she detected someone pinching her cheeks.

Her eyelids were heavy and felt swollen. A dull pain pulsed through her head.

“You have a real hard time getting out of bed,” Oscar commented dryly, peering down at her with an appalled expression. She could only nod.

He poked lightly at her cheeks, yet she just couldn’t manage to get herself out of bed. Her mind was so sluggish, and she felt only half awake and still dreaming.

“Oh yeah… What did you come from four hundred years in the past to do?” the prince inquired casually. His phrasing made it sound like it didn’t matter to him at all.

The answer to that was obvious, however. Tinasha flashed him a smile that could steal the heart of any who beheld it.

“To see you,” she whispered, then closed her eyes again and fell back to sleep.

While he was blown away by that reply, he recovered and shook his head as if shaking off a binding spell of some sort.

“That’s a good line,” he muttered, but it didn’t reach the already dreaming Tinasha.

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“Your Highness! Weren’t you shot at yesterday? Why did you sneak out of the castle without letting me know?!” cried Lazar, on the verge of tears as he rushed over to Oscar the second he left his room.

The prince took the report from his friend and gave it a simple once-over. “So they didn’t catch whoever did it. Admittedly, I didn’t think they would. It’d be wise to retreat in that situation if your first shot misses.”

“Why are you speaking like this happened to someone else?! Everyone knows that you, Your Highness, have a tendency to poke your head right into unusual cases like this, so you really can’t…”

“It was Tinasha who wanted to go take a look. I was only accompanying her,” countered Oscar.

“B-but Princess Tinasha is nowhere to be found! Did you leave her behind somewhere?!” Lazar cried.

“Oh… Right; forgot that would happen.”

After she fell asleep the night before, Oscar visited his study briefly to appraise himself of where things stood. But now that Lazar brought it up, he realized he hadn’t informed anyone of Tinasha’s whereabouts at all.

Oscar glanced at Lazar, who was still in a dither, and said plainly, “She’s in my room. I left her there because she refused to wake up.”

When Lazar heard that, the color very slowly drained from his face. He grabbed Oscar’s lapels, his mouth opening and closing like a fish. Oscar regarded him with amusement.

“Y-you are such a…,” Lazar finally sputtered.

“Relax. Nothing happened. Seriously, I’ve never met a woman who’s more trouble to deal with than her.”

“Is that really true?!” Lazar yelped.

“It really is.”

With that cavalier reply, Oscar set off down the hall, Lazar running after him.

“Are you sure that’s the truth?! Look me in the eye and say it!”

“Stop nagging at me!”

The voices of the two men grew more and more distant down the corridor. The beautiful mage remained sound asleep in bed, where even his voice could not reach her.

4. Inaudible Whisper

The mutters of several people echoed around the dark stone hall. Soft, irritated clicks of the tongue bounced off the cold floor.

“So assassinating the crown prince failed? If only Lita had done her job well. Then this wouldn’t have happened.”

“But didn’t Lita die because someone spotted Jarno?”

“That battle was pathetic. Such a useless death.”

Men and women of varying ages offered their thoughts.

If pressed to find a common denominator among them, it would be that they all possessed the nastiness commonly found in schemers and conspiracy mongers. Some of them were simply in it for fun, while others were thoroughly immersed in the world of evil stratagems.

“This means the problem of Akashia remains, yes?”

“If we could just snatch that away, we’d have no cause for concern.”

“Apparently a royal from Tuldarr resides in Farsas Castle now…”

“Tuldarr royals aren’t anything to fuss over these days. Still, we should avoid injuring them to get on Tuldarr’s bad side.”

“Besides, it’s not like their princess is going to be in Farsas forever. We just have to play our cards right. That means ensuring she happens to die unexpectedly. That way, Farsas has to take responsibility.”

The last speaker let a gleeful cackle slip. The others joined in, and their infectious laughter blended with the night and faded away.

A sense of certain victory pervaded the secret underground chamber.

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When Lazar stepped into the study with a sheaf of papers in hand, he was struck dumb by the sight he witnessed there.

Oscar was working at his desk while a black-haired mage clipped his fingernails for him. Absorbed in her task, she wielded the tiny pair of nail clippers deftly.

Once she looked up and greeted Lazar, he recovered from his flabbergasted state enough to ask her, “*What* are you doing?”

“I came to collect some of his nail clippings, but I felt bad about only cutting one, so I thought I’d do them all…”

“It seemed ridiculous for me to stop her, so I let her,” added Oscar.

“Later, compare your right and left hands and admire my work,” Tinasha said, concluding her efforts there and sweeping the clippings into a tiny bottle. Looking smug, the young woman gave it a little shake, which Oscar regarded with mild revulsion.

“How’s the analysis going?” he asked.

“I’m making good progress. The end is in sight. I’ll be able to start breaking the curse in another four to five months.”

“You’re truly going to break it…? I thought that was a joke.”

“I’m doing my job! If you’re so suspicious, you’re welcome to come check on me!” Tinasha shot back.

Then she remembered something and cocked her head pensively. “Oh, that reminds me. I’ve been meaning to ask but keep forgetting. Who was it that cursed you?”

In disbelief that Tinasha had never inquired about such a basic thing before, Oscar planted his elbows on the desk and buried his face in his hands.

Yet as he thought about it, he realized she hadn’t been there when he first arrived in Tuldarr and outlined the sequence of events that led to his predicament. Since Oscar had found her, Tinasha had always seemed to know of his curse, thus they’d never discussed it.

Tinasha had gone over a month without asking, but Oscar was at fault for not saying anything, too. Scolding himself internally, he began to recount the story. “When I was a kid, I got hexed by the Witch of Silence. She cursed my dad and me so we couldn’t have children. Afterward, we had people research a variety of ways to break the magic, but we also had to keep it a total secret. My visit to Tuldarr last month was the first time I discussed it with anyone in that nation.”

Tinasha listened raptly with wide eyes to his clear and concise summary. Once he finished, she sighed. “I knew the Witch of Silence excelled at curses, but this is truly something else. Honestly speaking, it shouldn’t be humanly possible.”

“And yet it happened. You killed a witch once, didn’t you?”

“I did, but it was a pretty close fight. I don’t know if I would win again the next time,” Tinasha admitted indifferently.

Her apathy concerned Oscar. Anxiety aroused, he pressed further. “Can you really break the curse?”

“I told you I can. And if you already have a future queen secretly decided on ahead of time, I can even help get her ready,” she insisted, casting her dark eyes down to hide the emotion filling them. “I’ll have you prepared to marry by next year at the latest. Just say the word.”

Her flat declaration sounded like a warning to herself as well.

With an elegant curtsy, Tinasha took her leave. As he watched the door close behind her, Lazar asked his lord, “In that case, should I seek out some candidates?”

“…Don’t bother,” Oscar decided curtly.

He just could not seem to get a handle on Tinasha. She threw him all out of sorts.

The cloud of insecurity surrounding her had certainly faded since the night of the festival. And she no longer got that faraway look in her eyes when he gazed her way—instead, her expression now exuded a more varied range of impressions.

There were times when, defenseless as a cat, she revealed her fondness for Oscar. Yet there were also occasions when she kept her distance, perhaps aware of her place. While her behavior changed often, what remained the same was her trust in him…along with the awkwardness and earnestness that tinged the edges of it. The concept of manipulating others deliberately was entirely foreign to her, so if he took her actions seriously, he’d just wind up as her plaything.

“She really is the most frustrating woman…,” grumbled the prince, then he downed the cup of tea she had made for him.

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The band of weapons thieves known as Saterne had a long and notorious history in Farsas.

The first recorded incident in their list of crimes was the raid of Tobis roughly 350 years ago.

Tobis, a small town close to the eastern border, was annihilated in a single night when the crooks descended upon it. The robbers appeared without warning, killed villagers brutally and indiscriminately, then razed the town of close to eight hundred to the ground. Only fifty-seven survived.

After that, Farsas mobilized its army to take down Saterne. Over the course of five battles, nearly a hundred bandits were killed or executed. However, after nearly a century of peace later, a gang using the same name resurfaced.

Ever since, Saterne had been like a lizard grabbed by the tail—presumed dead but always resurfacing after a time. Whether they kept returning because their leader endured or because some powerful mastermind backed them, the band’s existence was a constant thorn in Farsas’s side.

Oscar finished reading the report and tapped at his temple. “Saterne, huh…? But we forced the Ito to stop their raiding seventy years ago.”

“I believe King Regius naturalized them, yes,” said Lazar.

Oscar’s great-grandfather, known to be an eccentric in many ways, racked up a great many deeds of arms. Among these was his colonization of the Ito, a horse-riding tribe that made raiding villages their way of life.

Defeated by Regius's army, they were settled close to the fortress of Minnedart, where they had lived in peace since.

Saterne, on the other hand, had raided a settlement slightly northwest of the capital quite recently. Oscar rested his chin in his hands. "Saterne thieves are much nastier than the Ito. They kill women and children and set cities ablaze. It's time to wipe them out once and for all."

"According to this investigation, there's a very good chance they're hiding out in a cave system close to the town they attacked. It says there could be fifty to a hundred of them…"

"This better not be another lizard's tail situation. Regardless, I can't really ignore it… I guess I'll send Als out with some troops," Oscar mused.

"Yes, Your Highness. Also, we've received a request for an inspection at the fortress of Ynureid. The facilities and equipment are getting old, so they'd like to make a number of changes to the armaments," Lazar informed him.

"That sounds like more of a job for me than for Dad. Got it." Oscar nodded.

The fortress of Ynureid was a vital structure for Farsas's defense of the north. It kept a watchful eye on Druza to the northwest and Cezar to the northeast. Both countries were powerful enough to qualify as Great Nations, and they were also hostile toward Farsas.

When Farsas warred with Yarda to the east ten years ago, it was wary of the two attacking from behind. Fortunately, Druza and Cezar each kept the other in check, and thus neither made a move. Oscar recalled that, at the time, his gentlehearted father had complained that he hated war as he commanded the troops.

With two pending situations sorted, Lazar collected the signed documents. "All right, I will go get these processed."

"Thanks," Oscar said, glancing out the window as Lazar left the room. "The weather's great… Maybe I'll go get some exercise."

He did the bare minimum of training on a regular basis, but he did like to go observe the soldiers' prowess on occasion.

After making quick work of his remaining paperwork, Oscar headed out of his study for the training grounds.

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"I call for a change."

The incantation came as a whisper. In response, the spell configuration on top of the scrying bowl rotated minutely. Tinasha let out a shallow sigh now that she'd overcome a particularly tricky adjustment.

Currently, it was an endless repetition of tasks just like that. Breathing a new recitation into a place where something was missing, checking on the overall state, fine-tuning it further.

The analysis stage was labyrinthine indeed, but perhaps because she had come to understand the peculiarities of both the blessing and the curse, her speed of analysis was much swifter than it was when she began.

Tinasha took a step back and compared the spell configuration above the scrying bowl with the notes she took when she was younger. The blessing and curse in her drawing were symmetrical by design in order to cancel each other out, but she identified one tiny disparity between the spell on the sketch and the one before her.

"Is a definition name attached to this…?" she muttered.

The blessing spell cast by the Witch of Silence had a place where a very faint definition name was attached. Because that was the one unanalyzable part, it wasn't included on the corresponding spell in the notes.

"Using a definition name on a blessing… She was certainly careful."

Definition names were generally utilized in large-scale, long-enduring magic. By attaching a unique name to a portion of the spell, the caster could partially encrypt it so it could not be correctly deciphered as long as that name was unknown.

However, Tinasha had never heard of anyone using a definition name in a blessing or curse. That was because spells of that type were, by their nature, cast using distinctive language particular to the invoker. To utilize a definition name on top of that implied a considerable amount of skill and ego.

Frowning, Tinasha scrutinized the spot with the definition name, but it was just a very minute part of the spell when taken as a whole. The curse that canceled out the blessing ignored that portion. Thus, Tinasha thought it fine not to concern herself with it, either.

Tinasha took a pen and marked that spot on the drawing with a symbol, then let out a huge yawn. She had a faint headache after concentrating for so long.

"…Perhaps it's time for a little break."

Continuing in such an exhausted state wouldn't produce any results.

Tinasha used magic to affix the spell to the top of the scrying bowl, then left the room.

Oscar's sharpshooter attack from the other day was still bothering her.

In the end, the assailant had managed to get away, but Oscar—the target—appeared unconcerned. "They'll probably return," he had reasoned. While he may have been used to assassination attempts as a member of the Farsas royal family, Tinasha still wanted him to take it a little more seriously.

As the young woman made her way down the corridor, she glanced out a window. The greenery of the well-manicured courtyard garden caught the sunlight and sparkled dazzlingly. Ladies-in-waiting coming and going were the only people there, and Tinasha gazed out at the scene.

Just then, two people she recognized walked toward her from the other end of the corridor. Mages Doan and Sylvia noticed Tinasha, paused, and

bowed to her. She eyed the stacks of books they were both carrying and winced. “Those look heavy. Would you like some help?”

“We’re fine! We’re just taking them to the lecture halls,” answered Sylvia with a charming smile. It was infectious, and Tinasha grinned back.

Doan asked her, “Are you searching for something? You were looking out the window.”

“Yes, I was checking for any questionable visitors,” she replied.

“I don’t think any assassin would be so bold as to hang around in the daytime…,” Doan commented skeptically.

“I’d actually like to put wards up around the castle, but a foreigner doing so could be problematic…”

That the assailant managed to escape despite Tinasha inhibiting teleportation meant that the enemy was a group of at least a few mages. Tinasha was confident she was superior in battle, but there was nothing she could do without the authority to wield her power.

Uneasily, Tinasha snapped her fingers. Red sparks crackled and flew there, and Doan wiped the dubious look off his face.

Sylvia adjusted her grip on the stack of books in her arms and said to Tinasha, “Oh, right, I saw that His Highness went out to the training grounds. If there’s really anyone suspicious around, I’m sure he’d catch them, wouldn’t he?”

“Sylvia…,” Doan cautioned. Her words had made it sound like the crown prince was bait.

However, Tinasha’s dark eyes lit up immediately. “He did? The training grounds?”

“His Highness has everyone practice with him from time to time. He’s the strongest in the entire castle, so it puts all of them through their paces,” Doan answered.

“Yeah, Oscar’s a good instructor,” Tinasha whispered unconsciously, then clapped a hand over her mouth.

Sylvia inquired innocently, “Are you interested in swordplay?”

“I learned a little when I was younger. But after taking the throne, things were so busy that I couldn’t keep it up… I’ve never brought a sword into combat,” Tinasha answered.

Doan’s and Sylvia’s eyes grew wide at the unexpected response. They were among the select few who had learned that Tinasha was queen four hundred years ago. Doan heard it from Oscar, and Sylvia heard it from Tinasha herself. So they knew that this beautiful mage had the alias of Witch Killer Queen and fought on the battlefields of the Dark Age. Despite that, it was difficult to imagine the princess of the Magic Empire wielding a sword. However, it wasn’t so strange for a royal to don a sword for self-defense.

Restlessly, Tinasha cast her gaze out the window. Sylvia grinned and added, “You can get to the training grounds from the covered walkway on the east side.”

“What?” Tinasha cried with a start. Her gaze roved all over the grounds outside. After only a little hesitation, she bobbed her head at the two of them. “Um, I’ve remembered something I need to take care of. I’ll see you around.”

“Have a good rest of your day!” Sylvia said, waving good-bye to Tinasha as she scurried down the long hallway and away.

Once she was out of sight, Doan turned to Sylvia with an accusing look. “Sylvia, stop riling her up.”

“Riling her up how?”

“I mean, don’t push her any closer to His Highness than she needs to be,” he clarified. This was the woman Oscar had brought back from underneath Tuldarr Castle. Although she came from four centuries in the past, it was obvious she had a keen interest in Oscar for some reason.

That was all right so long as it remained benign, but things would get tricky if she got any more familiar with him.

However, Sylvia stared blankly at Doan, apparently not understanding. “Why? Isn’t it a good thing if they get along?”

“No, it isn’t. That’s the future queen of another country,” Doan pointed out.

Oscar had to be aware of that. While his actions often appeared rash and foolish, he kept a cool head when it came to politics. He wouldn’t cross any dangerous lines.

As for Tinasha, however, she looked to be in a somewhat more precarious situation. She adored Oscar and had no concept of how much was appropriate.

“She will leave our castle someday. The more attached she gets to His Highness, the more of a grudge she might bear. While that would be fine if she were an ordinary woman, she’s stronger than a witch,” Doan stated flatly.

If Tinasha were someday led astray by her emotions, there was no telling what might transpire.

Both she and Oscar would be rulers before long, and they needed to keep a certain distance.

“That’s why I’m telling you not to rile her up. Should something occur in the future, we wouldn’t be able to stop her,” warned Doan.

“Aww…,” moaned Sylvia in disappointment, pouting. Her lips were pursed like a sulking child’s. “Do you think she’ll give up on becoming queen there and come over to Farsas?”

“The mere suggestion is a danger!” Doan exclaimed, letting out a deep sigh in response to his colleague’s rash words.

Should that come to pass, Tuldarr might regard Farsas as an enemy. Envisioning an unhappy future, no matter which way it all shook out, Doan’s shoulders slumped.

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The training grounds, located along the castle perimeter, were entirely open and swelteringly hot as the earth baked in the sun's rays.

But regardless of that, a strong sense of enthusiasm emitted by the people there hung in the air. This was because the crown prince had shown up to participate in a series of matches with the soldiers.

"You're off your axis. You should pay a little more attention to that as you move," Oscar advised.

"Thank you very much!" said the soldier before him with a bow. As he engaged with the next fighter to step forward, Oscar noticed that there was a woman in the walkway facing the training grounds.

Tinasha was holding her long black hair down as the wind buffeted it. Oscar scowled at the sight of her standing in a patch of bright sunlight and muttered, "What is she doing there?"

He parried an oncoming blow, and the force of his counter knocked the soldier's sword to the ground. Oscar handed his weapon to the guard. "I'm going to take a little break. It's sunny out, so you all take care of yourselves."

Then he slipped out of the ring of soldiers and headed directly for the walkway. Tinasha froze as she noticed Oscar coming. She glanced all around her as if about to run but remained rooted to where she was.

Oscar approached with a scowl on his face. "Why are you standing in the sun? Get in the shade. Do you need me for something?"

"Not particularly… I'm merely taking a walk for a change of pace. Sorry if I'm intruding."

"I don't mind if you watch, but don't get a sunburn. Stand farther back," instructed the prince.

Tinasha's fair skin, white as snow, looked like it would burn to a crisp under the hot Farsas sun. She nodded obediently and retreated deeper inside the walkway.

Her dark eyes were trained right on Oscar. He couldn't meet that gaze for too long.

Tinasha possessed the dangerous beauty of a siren, enough to change the color of the air around her simply by existing.

"…Pity about that personality, though," whispered the prince.

"Oscar?"

"Nothing. You can go wherever you want in the castle, just don't get lost," he warned.

"If I get lost, I can teleport myself back, so it's all right. I can return no matter where in the world I go," Tinasha replied, offering Oscar an entirely assured smile.

In all honesty, the prince had no idea why someone like her was so fond of him. He couldn't recall ever treating a woman so carelessly in all his life.

Yet Tinasha's interest in him remained just as intense despite that, which made him wonder if she was still stuck on the man who saved her when she was young.

Oscar himself was not a person endowed with such unconditional kindness, however. If he didn't make that clear to Tinasha, it would be a detriment to them both. Which was why he took off a glove and lightly pinched her soft cheek.

"Ow! What was that for?!" Tinasha cried.

"Don't get careless. You don't know what could happen," Oscar chided.

"You're the one hurting me!" she protested, glaring at him reproachfully.

Oscar felt satisfied. "Were you *really* a queen? How'd that even work?"

"How…? Excuse you; I did my job well. I was incredibly busy," Tinasha stated confidently.

According to Oscar's research, Tinasha took the throne at age fourteen and abdicated at nineteen. In the years between, her overwhelming power dictated her reign over the Magic Empire of Tuldarr. Mysteriously, history spoke little of her after she relinquished her royal status. That was likely because she entered magical hibernation. No accounts mentioned any husbands or lovers. Tinasha had been a young and terribly lonely queen; people said she was like ice.

"Did no one urge you to wed during the five years you ruled?" Oscar inquired.

Ever since the prince could remember, folks constantly brought up the topic of marriage to him. He didn't expect things to be any different in Tuldarr, where magical power determined who would inherit the crown.

Tinasha responded instantly. "All the time, especially the Traditionalists who desperately wanted to chip away at my power. I got so sick of hearing, '*Take a prince consort and give birth to an heir.*'"

"Ah, because your spirit-sorcerer powers would weaken," Oscar surmised.

"What they really wanted was so obvious that I just ignored it. For spirit sorcerers, that really is a life-and-death problem, after all," Tinasha remarked.

"Oh yeah? Then why would that not apply to me?" countered Oscar.

Tinasha had readily declared she'd give birth to his child if she couldn't break the curse, but clearly that would enfeeble her own magic. Had she suggested that anyway because she was confident she'd break the curse or because she now felt differently on the matters of lovers and child-rearing?

"What? Well, that's because it's you," Tinasha responded, seeming to find that a strange question.

"…What's that supposed to mean?"

"Hmm?" Tinasha hummed, her eyes narrowing into slits as she pondered the meaning of her own words. Then she flushed as bright red as a tomato. "Oh, no, I didn't mean… It's just that it seemed to work out in the true history…"

"I really have no idea what you're saying," Oscar said.

"You don't need to…," muttered Tinasha, unable to meet the prince's eyes, her face crimson with mortification.

Oscar had gone too far with his questions and broached a forbidden topic. It was best not to pry too deeply into this, for both their sakes.

He did his level best to keep any emotions out of his voice as he asked again, “You can break the curse in time, right?”

“I can… I think. Probably.”

“Stop phrasing it in such an alarming way,” Oscar scolded.

Had this woman truly been so distant as to be compared to ice? All the prince could see was a kitten who had just found itself a comfortable home—a disobedient one who made mess after mess.

Cat caretaker Oscar grew serious and stated, “Actually, if you have anything you need from me, tell me soon. Two days from now, I’m leaving the castle to go do a fortress inspection.”

“All right. How long will you be away?”

“Two to three days. If anything happens, tell someone…not Als, he’ll be gone, too. Doan. Well, whoever you tell, they’ll get me the message,” Oscar replied.

If Doan heard that, he’d probably whine *Don’t put this on me…*, but there weren’t yet many people in the castle who could handle Tinasha’s unpredictable antics.

Her face finally returning to normal, Tinasha blinked her wide eyes at Oscar. “General Als will be absent, too?”

“Yeah, he’ll be commanding the forces to eliminate this band of thieves. Once it’s over, he should come right back.”

The two youngest among the Farsas Castle military commanders were Oscar and Als. In times of crisis, one or the other frequently led the troops, and their superiority in making swift decisions was acknowledged by all. But that made it more nerve-racking should something unexpected occur while they were both out.

Damn. Should I have staggered our missions…?

Als was set to leave the following day to root out the thieves. For a moment, Oscar considered appointing a different commander, but this was Saterne, a persistent and clever bunch. When it came to eradicating them, Als was best suited to the task.

Oscar eyed the woman before him. His biggest worry was that she would get into some sort of trouble again if he left her alone in the castle. He began to feel like it might just be better if he brought her along on his trip. “Tinasha, you should—”

“Um, can you really handle the inspection alone? Won’t it be dangerous?”

“…”

Immediately, Oscar no longer wished to take her with him.

Tinasha gazed up at him with heartfelt concern, and Oscar glowered back at her. “I can handle it better than you. Be a good girl and stay here.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m not a *child*,” she retorted, her words sounding like the lecture of an older girl. It was all Oscar could do to suppress his irritation.

Tinasha was indeed many years his senior, but that shouldn't have mattered.

In any case, if I brought someone like her along, they'd all think she was going to be the next queen of Farsas.

People would already believe that of any woman Oscar brought, but she was a foreign royal. Specifically inviting someone like that on an inspection would undoubtedly imply a future with her. Tinasha had to remain in the castle. It was the only option.

Oscar made up his mind and warned her again, "You better not get lured out by any assassins or sharpshooters or whoever, do you understand?"

He was referring to the night of the festival, among other things, and she flashed him a little smile, her lips pressed firmly together. "Leave it to me. And—be sure to come back safely."

Her soft whisper hung in the air. The desire she expressed and the steady look in her eyes were as loaded as if they were infused with magic.

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Two days after Als and five hundred cavalry soldiers rode out of the castle, Saterne was all but destroyed.

Half the ruffians hiding out in the mountains to the northwest of Farsas were dead or captured, and Als switched his orders to hunting down the remainders.

When Oscar received word of that at the fortress of Ynureid, he grumbled, "It's all gone about how I expected, but it's crucial we stamp out every last one of them…"

Saterne had fallen only to rise from the ashes countless times over by now, and it probably did not have one clear leader.

That was why, if they let the survivors get away, they would only band together into a new gang of thieves. This time they *had* to get more than just the tail; Oscar wanted every single one of them behind bars.

Lost in his thoughts, the prince suddenly felt a prickling sense of unease and narrowed his eyes.

It's all going too much to plan.

Saterne had to be aware that Farsas wanted the gang annihilated. Yet they kept hiding out right where scouts reported, and half of their gang fell so easily. Normally, they would have moved their hiding spot much sooner.

They must still have something up their sleeve.

Oscar tapped at his forehead, but he still couldn't figure it out. Because he wasn't there himself, all he could do was leave it to Als.

Still, he sent instructions to remain wary while hunting down those who escaped, then he returned to inspecting the fortress.

Two hours into his check of the ramparts, word broke of an emergency:

"The remaining Saterne members stormed the castle and abducted the princess of Tuldarr."

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Tinasha was in a library detached from the rest of the castle.

For the past week, she had been coming out here every day to reference books that were not to be taken from these shelves.

Seated at a built-in desk with her head buried in a huge stack of volumes, Tinasha was concentrating intently on the text as she reached out to turn the page.

All of a sudden, a sense of unease pinged at her mind.

She felt some sort of commotion behind her and looked up. “Hmm…? What’s going on?”

As Tinasha expanded her magical senses to see what she was picking up on, she noticed the slightest fluctuations in the castle’s wards.

Someone had slipped through from the outside, causing ripples that emanated from what was like a hole bored into the protective enchantments.

“Someone’s stolen in.”

Tinasha got to her feet reflexively. Quickly, she returned the half-read books to their shelves and then jogged toward the door. The mage at the reception desk gave her a quizzical look, but Tinasha ignored it and threw open the door.

Light poured into the dim library.

For half a second, Tinasha was aghast by what she saw outside. Two intruders in rough-hewn clothing were crossing swords with a soldier. The soldier looked to be losing as he parried their weapons away and shouted, “Intruders! Someone, get over here!”

While that was happening, Tinasha cast a spell. An intangible pressure blew away the two attackers who were about to cut down the guard. Then she attempted to draw up another spell.

Unfortunately, she was so focused on her casting that she failed to notice a blond man sneaking toward her in the shadow of the door. The man transferred his blade to his left hand and silently pressed in close enough to grab her.

“Ah!”

When Tinasha finally became aware of him, shock colored her fine features.

While dazzled by her beauty, the blond man used his momentum and his body weight to slam into her stomach.

Tinasha crumpled to the ground with a groan. The man picked up her slender body with one hand, checked the quality of her clothing, then shouted to his fellows, “This woman’s all we need! Retreat!”

He sheathed his sword, then readjusted his grip on the unconscious Tinasha, taking her in both arms. He dashed over to a transportation array in a corner of the gardens and leaped onto it without hesitation.

It was like passing through a pool of lukewarm water. Once he was through, he was back in the forest on the outskirts of the city.

The incursion group returning from the castle let out whoops of relief that they had made it back safely. They had brought back spoils of war—an unconscious woman.

The man carrying her asked the male mage who had been waiting on the other side of the array, “Jarno, how’s our hostage?”

Jarno inhaled slightly at the sight of her lustrous jet-black hair and peerless beauty. “This…must be the princess of Tuldarr. We couldn’t have found a more perfect captive.”

In response, cheers sounded from the gathered ruffians, while the mage’s lips curled in a smile.

He hadn’t thought they would bring back such a prize.

By nature, the members of Saterne were only good at making quick escapes. The mage had never been given reason to expect much from them. Therefore, he had hired them to divert Farsas’s attention, using half as bait to trick the military while deploying the remaining forces to the castle. Jarno sought the crown prince and Akashia, and there was no need to engage with Farsas head-on for that.

But when he saw how things had turned out, greed began to well within him. Jarno pointed to the woman. “Go exchange the hostage for Akashia as planned. Once you have Akashia, kill her. I’ll double your reward after you do.”

“Double?! Seriously?”

“Yes. But in exchange, you must slay her. Don’t even think of selling her off somewhere,” Jarno warned.

A crude grin materialized on the blond man’s face. “That’s such a waste. I’ve never seen a girl this pretty. She’d fetch an incredible price.”

“If you want to sell her, we don’t have a deal… Oh, and don’t lay a finger on her. That might make her less valuable to Farsas as a hostage. If she’s a potential queen consort, she’s only worth something with her virtue intact,” stated Jarno, rummaging through the pouch at his waist and digging out a golden arm cuff. It was inlaid with five glass beads, each of which was filled with a clear liquid. Needles protruded from the inside edge of the cuff.

The man unclasped it and fit it tightly around Tinasha’s upper arm. He smirked when he saw three rivulets of blood streaking down from it. “That’s a sealing ornament with a sleep drug inside. Don’t ever take it off. The drug isn’t magic, so she’ll wake up as soon as you remove the band. And if you’ve got any other sealing ornaments, put them all on.”

The other men left to go search for any similar items. As they did, the woman stayed fast asleep in the man’s arms. After a moment’s hesitation, Jarno reached out to touch her brow.

Killing her now would mean one less thing to fret over.

That would deny Jarno Akashia, however. That sword was their ultimate goal. It might have been a little risky, but all they could do was cross the

bridge they were on. Should things go sideways, they'd play their next card, the one made for such a moment.

Jarno whispered an incantation and poured a spell into the captive from where his hand touched her.

The man holding her eyed him skeptically. "What are you doing?"

"Just a little bit of insurance. No matter how powerful a mage is, they're helpless against psychological spells while sleeping," Jarno answered with a gleeful sneer. The blond man watched him, looking distinctly unnerved.

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"…What in the world does that birdbrain think she's doing?" muttered Oscar. He was in an open plain near the Farsas capital, which the Saterne thieves had specified as the delivery point.

After a frantic discussion following Oscar's hasty return to the castle, he had come to the location specified by the gang with twenty cavalry officers in tow.

Doan, right behind Oscar as his guard, gazed up at the cloudy sky. "Evidently, the Saterne members we captured were a diversion. Several of them knew the coordinates to teleport inside the castle and opened up a direct link. They were only inside for five minutes."

"Wish I could say things ended with minimal casualties, but I guess their intention from the very start was to get something to trade for Akashia. The fact that they got *her* is truly vexing, but I guess it's on me for making her stay home…," Oscar grumbled.

Quite a few magistrates had objected to exchanging the royal sword for a foreign princess.

Akashia was not merely a weapon—it was the symbol of the Farsas royal family. It was equivalent to Tuldarr's mystical spirits. If Oscar lost it to some outlaws, he might as well cast the Farsas royal family's reputation directly into the gutters.

Naturally, when they asked, "Are you really going to hand over Akashia?" no one dared to add "…For some foreigner?"

But Oscar had insisted they didn't have time to debate it and left.

He tightened his grip on the reins with a disgruntled expression. "If she gets killed, I guess that means war with Tuldarr."

"Please don't joke…," pleaded Doan.

So long as Tinasha was a hostage, Saterne wouldn't treat her roughly, but who could say what they would do once the exchange was complete.

Projecting an air of outward calm, Oscar whispered to himself, "This all happened because she was around me."

He should have known that quite a few people were targeting him since the moment he arrived back in Farsas. But until now, he had left the matter alone, reasoning that he'd work it out eventually. And now he was paying the price for it. He swallowed down his inner turmoil.

Finally, the party reached the handoff point. The area was open, with nowhere to hide, and roughly thirty Saterne riders were already waiting.

Oscar had his soldiers stop opposite them, some distance away. After drawing Akashia, he said, “We’re here. Where is she?”

A stir ran through the Saterne riders as they assessed the ancient craftsmanship on the hilt and the mirrorlike, double-edged blade. Riders on left and right parted, and a man emerged from between them, an unconscious woman across his lap.

“Put the sword in the sheath and toss it over,” commanded a menacing voice.

However, Oscar stood his ground. “Hand her over first.”

“Don’t press your luck! The sword!”

Oscar puzzled a little over Tinasha’s appearance. Five earrings adorned her snow-white ears, and her dark eyes were shut tight. “Then wake her up. I don’t know if she’s alive or dead.”

Saterne members exchanged glances at this arrogant demand. In the meantime, Oscar asked Doan, “What do you think?”

“She’s likely alive. But those objects… They’re probably sealing ornaments. Just one of them would render a normal mage magically impotent, so I don’t think we can count on Tinasha’s help even if they wake her up.”

“I wasn’t counting on it to begin with,” Oscar stated, patting his waist. He had another longsword belted on in addition to Akashia. He was ready for this to turn into a fight after the exchange.

The Saterne thieves, on the other hand, conferred among one another over the request to wake their captive.

Jarno had told them not to rouse her for any reason, but it was true that the transaction couldn’t proceed unless they proved she was alive. Touching her and feeling her body warmth made it obvious, but they also couldn’t hand her over first.

“We just have to take off that bracelet, right?”

“Is that a good idea?”

“She’s still got at least twenty sealing ornaments on her even after she wakes up. Plus, once we’ve got the sword, Jarno will open the transportation portal for us. Nothin’ to worry about.”

The man with Tinasha on his lap propped her body up while another bound her wrists together behind her back. Once that was done, the man holding her reached for the bangle.

With a soft click, it popped open. He patted her cheek. After doing so quite a few times, her long eyelashes finally started to stir. Large, dark eyes peeped from beneath. The young woman blinked several times, craning her neck around. She was about to fall off the horse because her wrists were fettered, so the man behind her held her up.

“Oh, my head hurts…”

“Wake up already, you dummy!” called Oscar, sounding exasperated.

She stared at him sleepily. “Oscar? What’s going on…? Wasn’t I…?”

“Do you want me to explain it to you?” he asked.

“Please.”

“To put it simply, you were stupid,” Oscar retorted.

Unable to tell if this was good-natured or irritated teasing, Tinasha frowned. Soon enough, her memories of what transpired returned. She took in her surroundings, realized her hands were bound, and finally grasped the situation. “Um, I’m sorry…”

“Unbelievable. You have to be more careful next time,” Oscar admonished, and Tinasha dipped her head.

One of the Saterne thieves got tired of listening to their banter and shouted, “Hurry up and give us the sword! You promised!”

“You’ll give her over once I do, right?” said Oscar.

“Of course,” brazenly fibbed one ruffian.

Tinasha’s eyes grew wide. “You captured me to get Akashia? …That’s no good at all. Take these off.”

The men burst out laughing at her demand. “The spoiled, ignorant little princess sure does like to talk.”

“Take them off? Do you really think we’d do that because you asked nicely?”

Tinasha scowled indignantly in response to their jeers. Amid all the taunts, Oscar alone looked unamused and started to urge his horse forward.

Seeing that, Tinasha’s tone shifted to that of a formidable conqueror. “Remove them, now. If you don’t, I will not be able to control my strength.”

The murderous intent lacing her voice was electrifying.

The thief holding her up froze. Tinasha’s dark, powerful eyes bored into his. Pain lanced through his hands, and the grip he had on the woman instinctively slackened.

Astonishingly, Tinasha did not fall.

She floated up into the air slowly. All present stared at her in disbelief.

Her long black hair fluttered as if it was a living thing all its own, and a beatific smile graced her red lips. Letting out a bewitching laugh, Tinasha gazed down at those below. “Casting proper spells is hard at the moment… So don’t expect too much in the way of control.”

“Don’t worry about that. These men live off murder and looting,” Oscar answered, his eyes narrowed as his horse continued forward.

Tinasha flashed a soft smile at his instruction. The ropes binding her wrists burst open. “All right.”

A single alabaster hand extended, and a giant sphere of flames roared to life before it. Tinasha effortlessly floated down and launched it without so much as a word.

The Saterne thieves flung their arms up to cover their faces. They felt a skin-searing blast of hot air and heard an explosion but then opened their eyes upon realizing they were still alive. The flames landed a short distance from the center, setting five men along the edge alight.

Tinasha pursed her lips, annoyed. “Ugh, my aim is terrible.”

“What are you doing? Just get back here,” Oscar insisted, reaching a hand out to her. Tinasha, dipping lower, stumbled through the air to reach him.

Just then, the man who’d had Tinasha in his grasp spurred his steed to gallop. “Don’t let her get away!”

Tinasha landed on the ground, and the man swung his sword down at her. She tried to cast a defensive spell but had difficulty because of the many ornaments. Just as she steeled herself for injury, someone grabbed her up from the side.

“O-Oscar…”

The prince didn’t reply. Deftly, he used one hand to settle her on his lap while the other wielded the longsword, parrying the thief’s blade away. Over Oscar’s shoulder, Tinasha watched the Farsas forces surge forward to attack the Saterne riders.

Tinasha heard Oscar chuckle in her ear. “You’ll regret your bad luck in getting her involved in this.”

The Saterne man’s sword was dispensed with neatly, owing to the incredible difference in skill between him and the prince. Oscar slashed once at his opponent, and the man fell to the ground without a word.

At the same time, the two sides met in battle, and shouts erupted across the open plain. Someone at the rear of the Saterne riders blanched at how quickly things had turned against his side.

“H-hey, Jarno! Open up the portal!”

Sadly, the plea went unanswered.

The Saterne thieves put up a weak resistance and were all slain by the Farsas soldiers in seconds.

※

“Hey, how do you feel? Did they do anything to you?” Oscar questioned as he and Tinasha rode back to the city.

“I was unconscious, so I can’t be sure. I think I was drugged. I feel sick…,” the young woman replied from his lap as she checked her upper arm. There were bloodstains just above her elbow.

Oscar frowned when he saw that. “I hope feeling sick is all it is. Get a physician to examine you later.”

“Sorry…,” Tinasha muttered, massaging her temples lightly. Everything still felt a bit disconnected to her, likely because of the substance in her system. That wasn’t all, however. Something was bothering her. She circulated the magic in her body and identified what was causing her discomfort. “I’ve been…ensorcelled. It’s some sort of psychological magic telling me what to do.”

“Psychological magic? Can you undo it?” he asked.

“I can. It looks like if I don’t, I’ll attempt to kill you after I’ve gone to sleep. Ah-ha-ha.”

“…Undo it right away,” Oscar instructed, pinching Tinasha’s cheek when he heard that carefree laugh. Could she sound any less worried?

“Ow,” the young woman groaned, escaping the prince’s fingers. Then she gave a shrug. “It’s ordering me to steal Akashia, too. Why is it so focused on Akashia?”

“I have absolutely no idea. Even if they steal the sword, only a royal of Farsas can wield it. There’s a bloodline binding on Akashia.”

“Right…,” Tinasha muttered, a grim searching look in her dark eyes. It disappeared as quickly as it had come, however, to be replaced with guilt. “I’m truly sorry that I’ve troubled you…”

“You’re not a cat, so don’t let yourself get picked up and carried off so easily. Still, well, it’s our fault they broke into the castle. I shouldn’t have left you behind. Sorry about that,” Oscar admitted.

When she heard that, Tinasha’s black eyes turned as round and wide as a feline’s. “Wh-what’s gotten into you? *You’re* apologizing?”

“Do you *want* me to pinch you some more?” he shot back.

“No, I’ve had enough!” Tinasha cried, shaking her head furiously. She shot Oscar a glance and whispered so that others couldn’t hear, “Um, if something like this happens again, you should prioritize Akashia over me.”

“Don’t *let* it happen again, birdbrain,” Oscar snapped.

“No, I mean… I’m someone who shouldn’t exist in this era anyway, so Tuldarr wouldn’t be in that much distress if they lost me.”

Naturally, Tinasha didn’t wish to be endangered again, but she was from another country, and her status wasn’t worth trading the royal sword of Farsas away for. She didn’t want Oscar to make the wrong choice for fear of worsening relations with Tuldarr.

In response to her earnest plea, Oscar stared at her coldly. “Do you not value your own nation?”

“It’s very important,” Tinasha responded instantly, without even thinking about it.

“Then you should understand your worth a little better. Don’t let others treat you lightly. Learn to play the game. We can always retake Akashia after you’re safe.”

“…Oscar,” Tinasha said in a hushed tone.

He was acting the very picture of a royal, quite befitting the master of the royal sword that was the symbol of Farsas.

Tinasha had never seen this side of the prince before, and she suppressed a sigh. “But I…”

Unlike the royal lineage of Farsas, which was determined by blood, the throne of Tuldarr could go to the most powerful. Tinasha was only a replaceable cog in the machine.

She was about to say as much when Oscar cut in, looking straight ahead, “Relax. I don’t value you more than my homeland. This time, it just worked out, and I was able to get you back. That’s all.”

His blunt words were designed to put Tinasha’s mind at ease, and they were also the truth.

Oscar possessed a strong, steady mind, and he wasn’t at all self-indulgent like his counterpart from long ago.

And yet it was because of that strength that he lent her his aid, too.

Tinasha felt overwhelmed with emotion. She stared up at him, struck with a feeling she could not identify.

Before long, the city came into view.

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From the woods, Jarno had used magic to spy on the exchange. He swore under his breath when the Saterne thieves failed.

“This is why I told them *not* to take the cuff off… Bunch of idiots.”

Moreover, the princess was more powerful than even he had assumed. Her wielding magic with so many sealing ornaments on was beyond anything he had expected. Perhaps Akashia was not the only thing that demanded disposing of.

“But considering how much power she has, she’d make an excellent pawn.”

He used psychological magic to slip a suggestion into her mind. The spell was still connected to Jarno, and he could manipulate it as he pleased. Right as he tapped into it, however, a female voice sounded in the deserted forest. “What are you doing, grinning to yourself? Gross.”

Jarno whirled around and was shocked to see a redheaded girl floating in the air. She regarded him with an indomitable smile playing about her lips. “You shouldn’t seek to treat her as a doll. I’d rather make you into my souvenir to bring back.”

A spell infused with devastating magic materialized as she spoke.

Jarno couldn’t even manage to scream before fainting. A maelstrom of power swallowed him.

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Once back in the castle, Tinasha undid the enchantment placed on her and ran a hot bath.

Soaking in the tub, she checked her body and was relieved to discover nothing out of place.

She really made quite the blunder this time. The closer a threat got to her, the slower her reaction would be. While that was a constant for mages, it was no excuse for slacking off. Tinasha refused to obstruct Oscar’s path to success.

Aware that her body was heating up all over, she hugged her knees to her chest. “Oscar…”

As Tinasha whispered his name, something hot buried deep at her core awakened. The prince was similar to the Oscar she had met in the past, but at the same time, he was an entirely different person.

He wasn’t gentle at all. In fact, he was actively mean to her. That was undoubtedly because their personalities clashed, but she also found herself not hating it when he treated her like a cat—because her feelings for him had not changed in all this time.

But now it was more than just that. Something else was making Tinasha oddly uneasy.

It was like her heart was thumping wildly in her chest. She was antsy, wanting to shout something out but also run far away at the same time.

This feeling hadn’t existed for her four hundred years ago—and neither had the mysterious heat that seemed to seep into her thoughts.

She closed her eyes with a flutter of her wet eyelashes.

“…It’s so strange.”

Maybe she was just exhausted after getting kidnapped and forcing herself to draw on her magic. The more her thoughts turned to him, the more out of it she felt. Perhaps it was just a simple case of getting overheated in the bath. Upon realizing that, she hurried to get out of the tub. Suppressing a wave of sleepiness, she wrapped herself in a towel and dried her hair.

There was a rapping at the door.

“Yes?” Tinasha called.

“It’s me,” came the reply.

“Oscar?!” the young woman yelped, rushing over to the door upon hearing a voice she had not at all expected. This was the first time he had ever knocked. Stranger and stranger things were happening, his apology from earlier included.

When Tinasha opened the door, and Oscar got a look at her, a bewildered expression froze on his face for a second. However, he quickly scowled and pinched her cheek. “Open the door *after* you’ve put some clothes on. Why are you like this?”

“I-I’m sorry…,” the young woman said, rubbing at her face as she headed back into the room and put a long mage’s robe on over the towel.

Perhaps owing to a childhood habit Tinasha hadn’t shaken, she tended not to be too wary around Oscar. In his eyes, she conducted herself no better than a child.

Once Tinasha had evened out the robe’s skirt and fastened the ties on either side, she removed the towel from underneath it. Oscar, who had followed her in, had his back turned throughout the process.

“I’m all dressed,” she announced, and the prince turned around.

“Physically speaking, are you okay?” Oscar asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. I undid the control charm, too.”

Oscar pulled out a chair and sat down, planting his elbows on the armrests and watching as Tinasha folded up the towel. “Listen—”

“What is it?” she questioned, but before he could go on, the air at the center of the room warped.

A girl with red hair teleported in, with an unconscious man in tow. “Lady Tinasha, I’ve returned!”

“Welcome back, Mila,” she replied.

Oscar was taken aback by the girl popping in out of nowhere, but he instantly recognized her. This was the same creature who had been guarding the door in the underground chamber of Tuldarr Castle. Tinasha had called her a mystical spirit, so she must have been one of Tuldarr’s twelve.

Mila swept her gaze across the room and noticed Oscar. Chagrin crossed her face. “A-am I interrupting?”

“Don’t worry about it. Who’s that man?” Oscar asked.

“This is my little gift to you. He’s the one who manipulated the outlaws into infiltrating Farsas Castle,” Mila said, and both Oscar’s and Tinasha’s faces darkened.

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“Molcado fled east of Tuldarr to what’s now Druza and had children there. At present, the only ones who can control wyverns are those connected to the court of Druza. It looks like they’re summoning up tons of wyverns and using the souls of the beasts to form a forbidden curse. They want to invade Farsas, but since Akashia would neutralize the curse and get in their way, they’re eager to get their hands on it any way they can. There, that was your Mila report!” the spirit girl concluded.

The three had moved to the council room, joined by other Farsas officials, who were left slack-jawed by this extraordinary mystical spirit’s account. Jarno, the man she had brought, was a court mage for Druza. Once he woke up, it was interrogation time.

With a grim expression, King Kevin looked around the deathly silent room. “I certainly did not expect them to be using such a thing to invade. Princess Tinasha, do we have any recourse should they put this forbidden curse into action?”

While Tinasha belonged to another country, she was present as Mila’s master. All eyes turned to the beautiful young woman, and she shook her head regretfully. “Akashia is the only thing… A curse like that would undoubtedly be crafted for large-scale destruction. It would push out any magic used to repel it.”

“I see.”

“However, a forbidden curse must still abide by the rules and laws of magic. A normal human can’t prepare a spell to loose more than five shots, regardless of how much time they have to get ready. Any more and the

caster won’t be able to withstand it. Therefore, victory means holding out against those five shots…,” Tinasha answered, then she glanced over at Oscar next to her.

She looked hesitant to continue, and he frowned. “What is it? Just say it.”

“Urgh! Akashia can render forbidden curses completely ineffective, but there’s no telling if its wielder would suffer aftereffects or not. You would need to draw up a barrier to protect the user,” she explained.

All who were gathered nodded in agreement. One among them, General Ettard, raised his hand and commented, “Should we not just invade them first? It seems prudent to strike before they are ready.”

“That could work. However, it risks being interpreted as aggression by other nations who know nothing of the deeper circumstances,” King Kevin asserted.

That made the room groan in disappointment. The king fell into deep contemplation for a few moments, his eyes shut tight. After a time, he fixed a placid yet resolute gaze on his son. “Can you do it?”

“I can,” Oscar responded without hesitation.

Kevin heaved a huge, long sigh. His eyes, normally so gentle and kind, now glowed with the majesty of a king. “Then let us assemble the army, but we will not fire first. We will wait for them to march.”

All bowed in assent to the king’s decision, including Oscar. Kevin then pointed directly to him. “And I would like you to take the throne.”

“Excuse me?” Oscar questioned, his eyes growing wide with understandable surprise. He quickly recovered, though, only to glower at his father. “Don’t abdicate just because you hate war.”

“I cannot deny that I despise conflict, but that’s not why I’m doing this. You’re the one who wields Akashia, which means you should rule. And you are not to die. Averting the forbidden curse alone won’t be enough. The true victory will be your safe return. We have no other heir and no future until we do, so I want you to go out there with all that in mind,” Kevin declared.

This was a wholly unforeseen turn of events. The magistrates watched with bated breath as father and son argued.

Oscar eyed his parent sullenly for a while but then abruptly broke into a rueful smile. “I never intended to perish in the first place… But all right. I’ll take the throne. While I’m out on the battlefield, you can take it easy with some paperwork.”

“I’ve no love for paperwork, either,” Kevin countered jokingly, and everyone relaxed.

5. Other Side of the Mirror

Ten days after Druza's plot came to light, Tinasha was sitting in a chair with her legs crossed. Her room in Farsas Castle was streaked with rays from the setting sun. The partially analyzed spell floated above the scrying bowl before her. Mila looked impressed as she inspected it thoroughly.

"Do you know where Druza is creating their forbidden curse?" Tinasha inquired.

"I do… But I can't tell you," answered Mila.

"Why not?"

"Because if I do, I know you'll just go directly there to kill them," Mila countered.

Tinasha fell silent, unable to deny that. In this situation, it could cause a diplomatic crisis if Farsas made the first move. However, if she went out solo, disarmed the threat, and came right back…

"You really can't do that. Touching that curse while it's being developed is very dangerous. Killing the spell caster will make that magic run wild and create all kinds of trouble," Mila pointed out.

"Ugh."

"Also, while you're definitely powerful, mages are rear guards. You're not meant to act alone! Despite the odd circumstances, you were kidnapped only a few days ago. You'd be in for a world of hurt if you took on anyone besides a mage. Recall how Unai almost killed you?" Mila lectured.

"Yes, I remember," Tinasha said sourly, appearing as though she'd just swallowed some bitter medicine.

When Tinasha fought Leonora the witch four hundred years ago, Leonora's right-hand man was a swordsman and the one who'd come the closest to ever slaying Tinasha. Senn, one of her spirits, had taken over the battle with Unai for her at the time. However, when Tinasha had abdicated, she returned all but one of the twelve spirits. Without them, it was foolhardy for her to charge off into uncharted enemy territory on her own.

Although she was from a long-gone era, Tinasha had been asleep that entire time and possessed no more experience than any other nineteen-

year-old. If Oscar used Akashia in a duel against her at close range, he would defeat her instantly.

As Tinasha reflected on her own limitations, Mila went on in a solemn tone of voice. “Using Akashia against the curse is the way to go. I understand how you feel, but it’s best not to take direct action.”

“But I thought Druza was the main reason why everyone agreed I should take over the throne…”

King Calste of Tuldarr had informed Tinasha that Druza’s movements of late appeared suspicious, and he wanted to revive the mystical spirits as a deterrent.

Yet ultimately, Druza’s weapons were trained on Farsas. They must have decided that if they were going to craft a forbidden curse, it would be easier to attack Farsas with it—even factoring in Akashia—than to go up against the Magic Empire.

“And it was during my reign that Molcado got away… I’m the war criminal here…” Tinasha sighed.

“You needn’t bear every responsibility! Molcado and Druza threw the first punch—you were merely saddled with the task of handling the threat. Stop trying to take on everything yourself,” Mila chided.

“But Farsas can’t withstand five shots from a forbidden curse of that scale, even if they *do* have Akashia. They can put up a normal barrier, but those who cast it will die,” Tinasha objected.

That was the outcome she hoped to prevent the most. That was why she wanted to go in first and take care of everything. Losing *him* was unacceptable, even if that meant sacrificing herself.

Tinasha’s eyes were cast down, and a very grown-up grimace crossed Mila’s girlish features. “If it comes to that, then you can be the one to provide that barrier. If you go out alone, and something happens to you, it’ll be that Akashia swordsman who suffers for it.”

Mila pointed at the spell floating above the scrying bowl. Tinasha remembered her true mission and fell silent.

She’s absolutely right.

Talented though she was, Tinasha couldn’t handle it all by herself. She didn’t possess enough combat experience.

A sigh skimmed across her alabaster knees. Oscar’s coronation was set for two weeks from now.

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After the Farsas council meeting, invitations to the coronation ceremony had been extended to many nations, including Druza and Cezar.

Both countries had turned down the offer, sending their regrets. No one was sure whether to be relieved or concerned by that, however.

Naturally, security for the ceremony was incredibly tight, which meant that two layers of surveillance secretly monitored the dignified foreign

guests in attendance. The first was the guards of Farsas, while the other was a spell Tinasha had cast over the whole castle.

An hour before the function, Tinasha's hair was done up, but she was still in her everyday attire. She knocked at Oscar's dressing room door, then pushed it open upon his reply.

The sight of him outfitted in all the finery of a king was enrapturing.

Lustrous silver armor and a crimson cape set off his toned physique beautifully. Akashia was in King Kevin's hands presently, so Oscar had another longsword belted at his waist.

A somewhat annoyed expression creased his handsome features. Though Tinasha said nothing when she entered, he cast her a skeptical glance. "What's wrong? And why aren't you dressed? Did you mix up the date for the ceremony?"

"I know what day it is! I'm going to change after this," Tinasha insisted, turning aside with reddened cheeks. He looked so different that she found herself unable to look at him head-on. She had almost forgotten why she came.

Pressing her hands to her red cheeks, Tinasha turned back to face him properly. "Excuse me, but I need you to let me cast a protective barrier around you."

"Sure, but this isn't some field that automatically kills anyone who comes into contact with it, is it?"

"Of course not! It's just for protection!" exclaimed Tinasha.

Shrugging, Oscar sat down on a chair. Tinasha came before him and began an incantation.

"My definition shall span three worlds. Let meaning lose its meaning, and any definition that diverges shall fall apart and the words turn to dust."

A spell configuration made of silver threads floated up before her. It was such a strong embodiment of magic that even Oscar could see it, and as the incantation went on, and the array swelled in size, the threads intertwined in increasingly complex ways. He watched with rapt fascination.

"My life supersedes every manifestation. May these words and this power interfere with everything that may befall."

As the recitation concluded, the spell twined itself around Oscar's entire body, sank into it, and disappeared.

Once that was complete, Tinasha exhaled. "It's only meant to protect you from magic. Thank you for your patience."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you," replied Oscar, which made Tinasha break into a pleased grin.

He stood and almost patted her on the head, but he retracted his hand when he realized her glossy black hair was swept into an elegant updo. "Go get changed. Prince Legis is coming, so don't be late."

"O-oh, is he? Yes, I'll be leaving now," Tinasha said, bobbing her head at Oscar before teleporting out of the room. Her departure was so sudden that

Oscar snorted, but only for a moment. Soon enough, his expression turned grave and serious.

Back in Tinasha's room, Sylvia and some ladies-in-waiting helped her quickly change and apply makeup. Her formal Tuldarr royal family robe was white and deep blue. All her jewelry doubled as magic implements, including the silver chains draped across her forehead. The robe hugged the lines of her slender body before flaring out in a graceful curve.

Tinasha checked herself in the mirror, then muttered, "It's been so long since I've worn such garments."

"You're a sight for sore eyes!" chirped Sylvia, pot of rouge in hand.

Just then, a lady-in-waiting entered. "His Highness Prince Legis has arrived."

"Coming," Tinasha replied. On paper, she was the princess of Tuldarr, so she and Legis would attend the ceremony together as representatives of their country.

The young woman tapped into the spell stretched across the castle, confirmed that nothing was out of the ordinary, and headed for the cathedral where Legis awaited.

It had been a while since the two had seen each other, and when Legis spotted Tinasha clad in her formal robe, his eyes widened. Then he broke into a smile. "That looks wonderful on you. Truly beautiful."

"Thank you," she answered. He held out a hand to her with perfect poise, and she accepted it. Aware that she was attracting attention, Tinasha proceeded with him into the cathedral. It was already full of guests who had taken their seats.

A short while later, King Kevin made his entrance along with Oscar; Akashia was hanging at the king's waist. Tinasha watched them while concentrating on her spell.

Once the two royals reached the altar, Kevin gave his opening remarks. Tinasha listened as she contemplated Akashia, the royal sword.

It was a weapon of exceptional power—the only one of its kind in all the world—said to have been gifted to Farsas by an inhuman being.

Although generally believed to only be a blade that neutralized magic, it could destroy and dismantle magic spells, as well as diffuse the magical power of those who touched it. Tinasha knew as much from experience; the sword's owner taught her about it when she was a girl.

Akashia deserved its reputation as a mage's worst enemy, and it could kill witches, too.

Most people thought Oscar had inherited Akashia before becoming king because of his unparalleled swordplay. However, Tinasha suspected it was to hide the seal on his own vast reserves of magic. Still, she was hesitant to confirm her suspicion, so for now she kept such thoughts to herself.

When Tinasha looked up at the altar, Kevin was taking a step down as Oscar stood from his kneeling position. Cheers and applause burst forth in

the cathedral at the birth of a new king, who brandished Akashia high above him.

Tinasha followed their example and clapped for him, too, unable to take her eyes off the sight of Oscar standing tall before the audience.

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After Oscar made an appearance in front of the common people, he stopped by his chamber to change his clothes before proceeding to the great hall.

No sooner did he enter than guests crowded around. He made polite conversation with them, a practiced smile on his lips, as he scanned the room. Legis and Tinasha stood by a window, smiling and laughing together. When the latter of the two noticed Oscar, she gave him a little wave.

Tinasha in her formal robe looked far lovelier than the young ladies in their gowns, and all eyes were drawn to her. The men nearest her kept stealing glances, quite preoccupied with Tuldarr royalty. Yet because she looked so close to Legis and because the two appeared so well matched, none approached her.

Oscar met Tinasha's gaze, his eyes carefully devoid of emotion, but then someone nearby addressed him, and his attention returned to his guests.

As Tinasha observed the new king, she offered her commentary, sounding as if it had nothing to do with her. "Poor thing. That looks exhausting…"

"You'll be in a similar situation before long," Legis reminded her.

"Yes, although I'd like to bow out because I've already done it once before," she replied. Earlier, Tinasha and Legis had made their rounds of the room as he introduced her to the important people from various countries.

All were astonished at the sudden appearance of a new Tuldarr queen, but Legis proved an adept conversationalist. By and large, Tinasha was received favorably. She gazed up at the man next to her, impressed. "In any case, Your Highness, that was amazing. Perhaps it's because I only just emerged from the Dark Age, but I'm really no good at that sort of thing."

"I wasn't proficient at it initially, either. It's simply a necessary skill to have. There's an everlasting wealth of things to learn, which I find fascinating," he answered sincerely, and she smiled.

Legis was smart, sensible, and hardworking. Tinasha mused regretfully that if she hadn't shown up, he would have made an excellent ruler.

But if they managed to evade Druza's threats, would she need to take the throne?

Excessive power wasn't a necessity in peacetime. Tinasha had abdicated for that same reason once. If the deterrent of her power lost its meaning once the enemy nation ceased to be a threat, then a ruler specializing in sheer might would also no longer be a priority. When Tinasha considered that, she had to wonder if taking Tuldarr's throne as requested was wise.

Sighing, Tinasha glanced at the stone embedded in her right wrist brace, a crystal acting as the core of her castle surveillance spell. Its transparent glow indicated that nothing was amiss.

While she was at it, the young woman inspected Oscar's protective barrier and found that he was walking along with a lovely young woman in a rose-pink gown. It was someone Legis had introduced Tinasha to. She racked her memory, trying to recall. "That's…Princess Nephelli of Yarda, isn't it?"

"Indeed. Yarda and Farsas are currently enjoying quite the friendly relationship," answered Legis.

It was only ten years ago that the two countries warred. Upon its defeat, Yarda lost a small portion of its territory, and after that, Farsas helped its former enemy recover. At present, the two nations were on friendly terms. Yarda, surrounded on all sides by the Great Nations of Farsas, Cezar, and Gandona, would not have been able to survive after that defeat had it not cozied up to one of them. The fact that Yarda chose to approach Farsas was undoubtedly due to Kevin's genial personality.

"While it's merely a rumor, apparently Yarda offered Princess Nephelli as a bride for Farsas after its defeat. The proposition was rejected, but I can't imagine why, so it's probably just gossip," Lazar explained.

"Ah, I see…," Tinasha muttered. She could certainly think of a reason—the curse she labored to break. So long as that remained, Oscar couldn't agree to marry anyone.

However, soon that pretext would vanish, and when it did, would Oscar take this princess as his wife?

Thinking about it put Tinasha in a sour mood. Her eyes followed Oscar and Nephelli across the room, though she maintained a tight smile.

Legis smiled awkwardly. "Your magic has become erratic."

"What?! Oh… I'm sorry," Tinasha said, flushing in guilt. As a vessel for so much powerful magic, her emotional fluctuations could sometimes influence that energy. Legis was a capable mage himself, so he could sense it.

Tinasha buried her face in her palm, and Legis gave a placid smile. "I have to admit: I'm quite jealous."

The meaning of his statement was obvious, but Tinasha was at a loss on how to respond. A faint smirk formed on her lips. "…It's like I imprinted on him. I don't quite understand it myself."

Now that she had compartmentalized the past as such, she was trying to approach Oscar from square one. He was nothing more than the man she had met upon waking in this era, someone she had nothing in common with.

But Tinasha didn't know what she wanted to accomplish by doing that. What was Oscar to her?

Presently, she couldn't put it into words. It was incomprehensible. The heat that seared her heart still lacked definition.

Still, Tinasha understood that she had to save and protect Oscar. There could be no conceding on that point. She refused to forget.

Sentimentality left over from her adolescent years or not, it made no difference. Tinasha expected no repayment from him for any of it. That was also why she wanted to look ahead and face the future. Nothing had even started yet.

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After three hours of conversing with guests who came for his coronation, Oscar took his leave as the banquet drew to a close. Making his way down the hallway, he stretched out his tight shoulder muscles.

Making polite, diplomatic small talk wasn't difficult for him, but it did prove tiring.

Fending off the incessant advances from a string of young ladies proved especially exhausting. Nephelli's personality was more straightforward compared to the rest, making it easier to spend time with her. However, the others, with their cloying perfumes, sapped his energy. If Oscar didn't take a bath and wash off all the scents, he would develop a headache.

Just then, a woman called out to him from behind. "Oscar, can we talk?"

It was someone who was difficult to deal with in an entirely different way from the other ladies. Turning back, Oscar spotted Tinasha with an apologetic smile. Her long eyelashes fluttered over eyes wavering with apprehension, and her red lips were deeply bewitching.

In makeup and dressed in her formal robe, she looked wholly unfamiliar to him. He was half enchanted by it yet hid his reaction well as he replied, "What is it? Has Legis gone back?"

"I'm going to see him off right after this. Before that, I wanted to undo your protective barrier. I'm sorry to bother you," she said.

"You could've done that anytime."

"Well, you had a steady stream of girls around you all night. I'm glad you enjoyed yourself, though."

Tinasha may have meant that mockingly, but the sulky tone of her voice made her true feelings obvious. Instead of pinching her cheek, Oscar replied evenly, "They all want to be queen, hence their incessant sales pitches. I am grateful that you'll break the curse."

Was he to grow older and remain unmarried, people from the countries around Farsas would notice and grow suspicious. It would incite sinister schemes that Farsas didn't need. Twenty was a perfect age to lose his curse.

At that, a line formed between Tinasha's shapely brows, something Oscar had almost been expecting. "I'm glad you'll have your pick of candidates. I hope you select the one most useful to you."

"Don't make it sound like I'm choosing some new court adviser. She can be totally useless, as long as she doesn't get in my way."

“That sounds like someone who would be the polar opposite of me.”

“Oh? So you *are* aware of that?” Oscar drawled, getting ahold of Tinasha’s face half out of instinct. She pouted, her soft cheeks trying to puff up, making an expression like a cat grabbed by the scruff of its neck. Oscar couldn’t help but burst out laughing at the sight.

“Why are you chuckling when you’re the one doing it to me…?” Tinasha questioned softly.

“It gives me so much joy to tease little kids,” he replied.

Tinasha sighed when she heard that. Her long eyelashes trembled, casting shadows along her ivory cheeks. The melancholy expression on her beautifully made-up face had its own terribly powerful charm.

“Do whatever you want… I have my own job to take care of. However, you have as many enemies as you do women vying to be your queen. Let me know if something happens,” Tinasha stated.

“What would you do if I did?” questioned Oscar.

“I’d take care of it,” she answered firmly. Her words were heavy with pure, genuine fighting spirit.

Oscar frowned at that glimpse of her being coolheaded. Evidently, Tinasha truly wasn’t aware that her strong emotions were grating on her. That was why she kept trying to sacrifice herself any way she could—and why she didn’t balk at the idea of getting hurt.

“Listen—”

“Mm, I’ll undo the barrier first,” Tinasha interrupted, walking right up to Oscar and reaching out to touch him. In a hushed voice, she intoned the recitation.

The new king could not imagine this delicate, fragile frame of Tinasha’s defeating a witch. She had admitted she was unsure if she could do it again, and it must have been just as she said—a close, risky fight. Although the young woman had lived through many challenges, it didn’t mean she could keep it up forever.

Oscar suppressed a heavy sigh. “…How much longer do you think ending the curse will take?”

“A little under four more months. Sorry for the wait,” Tinasha replied.

“Do you need anything more from me?”

“Not at present, although I may after a bit more progress.”

After finishing her incantation, Tinasha looked up. Her dark eyes were trained right on Oscar.

She didn’t make the slightest effort to hide the innocence of her heart. It was doubtful she even knew how to do so. For a woman like that to be queen during the Dark Age must have meant she lived every day treading on thin ice to keep her country safe.

Yet she was embroiling herself in the conflicts of a new era now.

That notion helped Oscar come to a decision. Keeping his face expressionless, he commanded, “Go back to Tuldarr already.”

His voice was cold, and Tinasha didn't immediately comprehend what he meant.

After a moment, she opened her eyes wide with surprise. "Go back? Why?"

"It doesn't matter. If there's nothing you need here, then you can work on things in Tuldarr, can't you? And you can come here whenever you do need something—or call for me."

"True, but…," Tinasha protested faintly, feeling as if her vision was darkening. She didn't understand why this was affecting her so much. Her heart was pounding wildly.

Massaging her temples, she met Oscar's gaze. "What happens if war breaks out? You may have Akashia, but no living person can withstand a forbidden curse."

"You're not from here, so that's not your concern, and you certainly shouldn't be getting so involved," he retorted coolly, rebuffing her.

Tinasha made her face go blank. She had the sense that behaving normally would only make her look weaker. The temptation to lash out in resentment rose, but she quelled the urge. "I won't get in your way. Use me in the fight."

"No. What if something happens, like how you got kidnapped? I don't want to make an enemy out of Tuldarr just because we have a lot on our plate. Run along back to your country already."

The words wounded Tinasha so much that she felt ready to burst into tears.

She went from massaging her temples to digging her nails into the skin there, and yet she didn't feel a thing. Tinasha had no idea if she was still standing up straight. The young woman wanted to throw her arms around Oscar but couldn't manage to reach out.

Instead, she eked out a choked whisper:

"Let me stay close to you…"

Oscar regarded her expressionlessly but ultimately gave a little sigh and stated, "Don't cling to me. It's annoying."

For a second, Tinasha's dark eyes froze upon hearing that. She couldn't breathe, and the noise of something breaking sounded in her ear.

Oscar's eyes filled with shock, but Tinasha remained oblivious to that.

Her head hurt.

She felt sick.

Something was shattering—at her temple, in her ears, in her hands. She couldn't control her emotions.

Tinasha didn't need anything in return. She didn't care if he despised her, so long as he didn't reject her attempts to protect him. If he denied her that, then she didn't know why she was even there. Why had she come through time?

Tinasha shut her eyes tight, though she didn't know if that was because she couldn't see anything or because she didn't wish to.

There came a little sound, and Tinasha's earrings cracked apart, startling Oscar.

One sliver cut her fair cheek, sending blood running along the soft skin there. The sealing ornaments adorning her could no longer hold back her powerful magic, agitated by her feelings. One by one, the objects broke under the pressure.

She squeezed her eyelids tight and knit her brows to bear the pain.

"Tinasha," Oscar called, reaching out with the intent of picking her up.

That was when the aftereffects of the magic surge shattered the windows in the hallway. It must have alerted someone, for there were audible footfalls as a person ran from the end of corridor.

When he took in the sight of the two of them and how Tinasha's magic was massing together, Legis shouted, "Tinasha! Don't!"

He dashed over and embraced her slender frame from behind. He poured his own magic into her, offsetting her energy as it leaked out. "Calm down… Can you hear me?"

After a while, Tinasha gave a little nod. Legis's face relaxed in relief. "Take some deep, slow breaths. Control your magic… It's all right; you can do it."

"Okay…," she said. Little by little, the strain faded from her face until it was like an expressionless mask. Oscar watched in silence.

Holding her in his arms, Legis reached out and healed the cut on her cheek.

"I'm very sorry… It wasn't on purpose," she whispered.

"I understand," he replied.

Oscar gave a small sigh. Tinasha's eyes were still shut tight. After one more look at her lovely face, Oscar straightened up to face Legis. "We've borrowed her from you all this time, but I'm sure she has many things to do before her coronation. I believe this is a good opportunity for you to take her back to Tuldarr. Thank you very much."

Once Legis heard that, he understood why Tinasha had flown into chaos. He glanced at her, unsure how he should reply.

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

Tinasha stared straight at Oscar, her eyes as deep and dark as an abyss.

There was an unbridgeable distance there that made her so very far away.

Tinasha gave the slightest jerky nod.

The young woman gazed at Oscar searchingly for just a moment before breaking into a sweet smile. "I'm truly sorry you witnessed that spectacle. You are quite right. I will return to my country and continue my studies there. I can't thank you enough for all the kindness you've shown me during my stay."

After that, she sank into a gracious curtsy. Legis was baffled, but she only took his arm and turned to walk away.

That last sweet smile she gave Oscar seemed to him like she was on the verge of sobbing. He felt a slight pang for causing her to look like that.

Still, he had already made up his mind. It was only a matter of whether she left sooner or later.

"That girl is one fine piece of work…," he muttered.

Once she was out of sight, Oscar shook his head as if to stave off the last bits of her presence and then continued on his way.

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Voices ranging from the gleeful to the concerned echoed around the cavernous space.

An old man said bitterly, "A new king has taken over Farsas, and he's shown himself to be far shrewder than the old one."

"So we still don't have Akashia? That damn Jarno, couldn't live up to his claims," a woman cut in, tutting disapprovingly.

"No matter how strong Akashia is, its wielder is only human."

"The only question is how efficiently we will win. It has been four hundred years since our forefather Molcado was chased from Tuldarr in disgrace. We inherited his forbidden curse but are still denied the recognition we deserve—forced to skulk around underground. Yet soon enough, our time will come. All will know how powerful we truly are. Yes, just like we once did during the Dark Age."

Silence reigned over the room. The old man cackled loudly.

"If we can invade and conquer Farsas, we might be able to have our revenge on Tuldarr. However, the king and his royal council still doubt our power. We'll need to show them some overwhelming proof. Don't you agree, Valt?"

The old man directed the last bit to one corner of the dark room, where a young man had been sitting silently the entire time.

Valt smiled. "Yes. Though, we'll need to be wary of growing overeager."

He glanced at a door on the far wall, which led to the chamber where the forbidden curse was being crafted. Even now, massive waves of power seeped from it.

The schemes being crafted here would forever change Druza's fate.

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"Am I really that clingy?!"

"You are. If you weren't, you wouldn't have slept for four centuries," Mila replied.

Tinasha's face grew tight. Her hands trembled around the book she was holding. "It's just to repay a debt! I don't feel anything for him here in the present!"

"I'm not so sure," Mila replied doubtfully.

Tinasha had practically fled Farsas with Legis. Now back in her chamber in Tuldarr Castle, she was ranting bitterly about Oscar. Legis sat next to her, sipping tea with a wry look.

Mila gave a very humanlike shrug from her spot in the air. “You’re pretty and powerful, so most men are either going to fall for you or fear you, but he’s the Akashia swordsman, and he’s probably got lots of girls to play with. You just chose the wrong man. Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

“I *was not* pressing him to marry me!”

“I guess you were just too attached. I bet it turned him off,” Mila concluded.

“I… I could just kill that man!”

“Should we go kill him?”

“Not literally!” Tinasha insisted. She jammed the books in her hands onto a shelf. Numerous sealing ornaments adorned her ears and fingers. If not for those, the room they were in would be a maelstrom of loose sheets and tomes. “I’ll still break his curse, though! And maybe I’ll put some really weird hex on him in its place. Like one that makes him hate vegetables!”

“Don’t waste all that magic on petty revenge,” Mila retorted.

After listening to the two go back and forth with a pained smile, Legis set down his teacup and spoke up. “He doesn’t wish to get you involved in a war. You should recognize that for what it is.”

“Regardless, he’s naive to think he can handle it on his own!”

“Lady Tinasha, I could say the very same thing to you,” Mila interjected.

“How lovely it must be to view things so objectively!” Tinasha snapped, stomping over to the scrying bowl in the center of the room. Unfurled above it was the spell she was analyzing.

Too low for anyone else to hear, she grumbled to the unspeakably beautiful spell, “And here I got my hopes up the littlest bit.”

When Tinasha decided four hundred years ago to put herself in a magic sleep, a small part of her had hoped he might fall in love with her.

In the erased history, she and Oscar had wed in the 527th year of the Farsas calendar. Accordingly, she had requested that Mila bring him to her in that year. However, Oscar had shown up a year early, and like a foolish child, Tinasha hoped it meant he had come to make her his wife.

It didn’t take long for her to learn she was mistaken, and now she understood that the man she met a long time ago and the one she knew now were very different. Even so, she had held out a bit of hope that maybe they could start something from the beginning.

Sadly, the reality was that Oscar didn’t have any interest in Tinasha, and she thought it wrong to put her desires above his. She had come to free him from his distress, the way his wife had done in the original timeline.

After letting out a long, deep sigh, Tinasha attempted to bolster her spirits. “For now, I’m going to analyze the curse and break it at lightning speed. After that, I don’t care! My role in his life will be done!”

“You should do as you please,” Legis remarked with an exhale of his own as he beheld the highly entertained spirit and her fuming master.

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When Lazar heard what had transpired, his jaw dropped. “You chased Princess Tinasha away? And you even said all that to her?”

“It would’ve been the same no matter what I said,” Oscar countered.

“No, it would not! How could you say such cruel things to her? What if she decides not to break your curse now?” Lazar cried.

“She won’t. Tinasha has too strong a sense of duty. At most, she’d probably give me some weird curse instead,” Oscar replied.

“…”

Lazar threw Oscar a reproachful, appalled stare, but the king ignored it and calmly went about his work.

He had just arranged to send a considerable number of troops to the northern fortress at Ynureid in an effort to remain vigilant against Druza. The stronghold would be ready to deploy forces no matter what the enemy did.

With a disappointed sigh, Lazar shook his head. “I just know she would have stood by you no matter what.”

Oscar didn’t answer, instead working on the documents before her.

Lazar groaned in the face of such audacity. “Your Highness…no, Your Majesty. I was always convinced that you liked her, no matter what you said.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. She’s going to become queen of Tuldarr. Even if I did like her, nothing could come of it,” Oscar replied.

As Lazar realized the implied meaning there, his eyes grew wide. “… Wait, so does that mean…?”

“Just do your job. Here, take this,” Oscar instructed, shoving a stack of papers into Lazar’s arms. Though the beleaguered attendant looked like he still had more to say, he left the study. Once the door clicked shut, Oscar’s neutral expression finally darkened into a scowl.

Oscar didn’t *like* her.

He found her entertaining and unpredictable.

Tinasha’s distant gaze used to irritate him, yet now something different was riling him up, making it hard to relax.

There was nothing more to it than that. He didn’t feel anything more for her.

Even if Oscar entertained the notion that he was attracted to her, she was to become the queen of a foreign power. Among the smaller countries to the east, there was once a king who fell for the queen of a neighboring nation. He razed it in order to have her—and spent the rest of his life resented by the woman he loved, justifiably.

That was a rather extreme example, but Oscar believed that keeping Tinasha with him was still asking for trouble. He couldn't bring himself to do such a thing simply because he desired to—which was why it was best not to pay those feelings any mind.

Regardless, Tinasha had Legis. The two of them looked plenty close. Oscar didn't know why she still bothered associating with him.

"…I don't feel like becoming her plaything," he muttered, aggravation flaring up. As he signed documents, his grip on the pen tightened.

6. Black Sighs

While the fortress of Ynureid to the north of Farsas was in a state of high alert, in the palace at Druza, King Rodion sat far back on his throne as he listened to a mage's report.

The elderly magic user knelt before his king with an eerie grin on his wizened face. "Work on the forbidden curse is proceeding smoothly. We believe it will be ready for use in battle within two to three days."

"Can it really defeat Farsas?" asked King Rodion.

"Undoubtedly. It would be next to impossible to guard against it, even for a witch. Should they use Akashia against it, the weapon's swordsman will die," responded the old mage confidently.

Rodion nodded, asking nothing more.

A forbidden curse was the name given to the type of magic that was considered far too dangerous, crafted through unpleasant means. Some forbidden curses were large-scale spells that could be used in battle. These required considerable amounts of time and effort to assemble, to speak nothing of sacrifices. No ordinary country would ever employ such gruesome things.

Some spread rumors that knowledge of forbidden curses lay buried deep within Tuldarr or were kept secret among the three witches. However, no one could be sure of the truth. Even Molcado, who escaped Tuldarr four centuries ago and passed on the technique to summon wyverns, was an exception among exceptions. Up until now, his descendants had lurked underground, spending long years devising forbidden curses.

And now the hour to display the fruits of that labor was upon them. Their target was Farsas, which had long been an eyesore to them.

Rodion chuckled to himself.

Let these forbidden curse mages head out first. If they failed, he was content to count them among the acceptable losses.

Should they succeed, it would be the beginning of a new history.

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On the twelfth day after Oscar's coronation, a clear afternoon, disturbances were felt northwest of the fortress of Ynureid along the magical barrier separating Farsas from Druza.

The stronghold notified the castle of this immediately, and the leaders of Farsas teleported to Ynureid as soon as they heard. Everything was unfolding as planned, but no one could hide their nervousness.

As Oscar and Kumu observed the flurry of well-organized activity in the fortress courtyard, the former asked, "How long until they're here?"

"Judging by the enemy's movement speed and the curse's range, about an hour. I think we'll make it well in time," answered Kumu.

"Got it."

"It's only a small group who's crossed the border—seven among them appear to be the spell's users. Additionally, approximately twenty thousand troops are on standby in Druza just on the other side of the border," he added.

"That's not many. Either Druza's leaders are confident in the curse, or they don't want to get too mixed up in this," remarked Oscar.

"A battle centered around use of magic of this scale has never happened before… They may also be taking a wait-and-see approach," Kumu mused.

"Maybe they think that if it doesn't work, they'll just get rid of the forbidden curse users and blame it on them," said Oscar.

Sounds like something that crafty old fox would do, he thought darkly, referring to Rodion. The young king brought a hand to his waist, where Akashia—the key to everything in this clash—hung securely.

"Five shots, huh…? Well, I'm sure we'll manage one way or another," he muttered.

He didn't sigh. War was upon them.

The fourteen intruders who had crossed into Farsas stopped in a forest. Ynureid was visible in the distance.

Between the Druzan border and the fortress lay wide, open plains with no cover of any kind, save a few infrequent wooded areas. The group watched the bastion from one such spot.

There were no towns or cities nearby. Ynureid was the cornerstone of Farsas's defense in the north. In other words, breaching this stronghold would make it possible to march unhindered to the capital.

A scout returned, and a mage asked, "How does the fortress look?"

"I can't tell. Seems the same as ever, but…," the scout answered.

"Oh? Do they not know? I thought that rumors would have leaked out," remarked another mage.

"Even if our plan was leaked, they're helpless to stop it," declared the old mage, clad in a robe. He glanced at the cloth-wrapped bundle the woman next to him was holding.

She noticed his gaze and nodded gracefully. That was when a man reached over to take the covered object from her.

"You must be close to your limit. I'll take that," he said.

Ominous magic emanated from the bundle, which contained a spherical magic crystal the size of a child's head that encased the forbidden curse. It was an incredibly dangerous object that could not be destroyed or placed anywhere.

Were it carelessly set down on the ground, waves of magic and noxious miasma would immediately corrode away all around it, contaminating everything as the curse spread. As this crystal was terribly powerful, it had an adverse effect on those who carried it. No one person could bear it for long.

"Just a little farther, and it'll be in range. Let's hurry."

The guards nodded. The party crept forward on foot cautiously, so as not to arouse suspicion.

After some time, the group reached a small copse of trees about ten minutes from Ynureid. Visible through gaps in the trees, the fortress looked no different than it did in peacetime. There were no troops stationed in the vicinity, either.

"Looks like we can proceed unobstructed."

"It's too quiet…"

"Don't worry about that. Focus on what we're here to do."

The man unwrapped the cloth, revealing a dark, murky globe. A frisson of anxiety ran through the group.

"Don't set up a shield. You'll get sprayed."

"Got it."

Crystal in hand, the man moved to a position outside the forest where the fortress was in his direct line of sight. The old mage faced the stronghold, the cursed sphere before him, and placed a withered, spindly hand on its cold surface. Two other mages stood on either side and also touched the crystal. Everyone exchanged looks, taking nervous breaths.

With a sonorous, resonant voice, the old mage intoned the incantation.

"Negate it, ravage it, corrode it, O imprisoned souls! By this power, O loathing, rend it apart!"

For an instant, the crystal glowed with a dazzling light.

Then, screams of resentment tore out of the globe, along with a giant, violent ebony torrent.

Swallowing up all the nearby air, it took off directly for the fortress.

The party watched in stiff silence as the huge mass of magic made contact with the fortress at a frightening speed, then enveloped it all until the structure was a gigantic dark orb.

A beat later, a deafening explosion rocked the entire region. Instinctively, the woman behind the old mage covered her ears. As they watched, the dark orb slowly lightened in color.

The fortress was gone, not even leaving rubble or debris behind. There was only a swath of land polluted by the curse.

"I-it worked! Report back to His Majesty!" shouted the soldiers excitedly.

The woman used a spell to inform the royal forces of their success. Once she was done, she broke into a grin and nodded. “The troops will begin their march and should reach us in half an hour.”

“I suppose we’ll wait here,” stated a young man, unable to conceal his glee. He took a moment to catch his breath. The past four hundred years his order had spent laboring over the forbidden curses passed on from Molcado were finally paying off. Their deeds would go down in history. Everyone broke into grins of relief and irrepressible excitement.

Five minutes later, they suddenly heard something sharp whizzing through the air.

The mage standing next to the woman gave a little twitch and slowly slumped to the ground.

She peered down at him, frowning, and saw an arrow lodged deeply in his skull.

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“I killed one mage.”

“Great shot,” praised Oscar with a little smirk upon hearing that.

Next to him, Als stared blanky in the direction where the fortress had been. “There’s no trace of it…”

“It’s been rebuilt many times over the years,” Oscar stated.

Ettard, who stood across from them, sounded saddened as he said, “It had so much history… But I suppose considering the circumstances, we had to.”

“Just four shots left,” Oscar observed.

The enemy mages crossing the border into Farsas was the cue for everyone in the fortress to vacate the structure. The empty stronghold then became a decoy as the soldiers hid in the surrounding woods, watching things play out from there.

One of the northeast forests got sucked up by the curse. That was where the archer who shot at the mages had hidden. Fortunately, he was no longer there, having used a transportation portal to withdraw.

Oscar nodded, unaffected. “Three shots left. I wonder if we can draw them a bit closer.”

No sooner had he said as much than a report came in that one of the arrows had failed to find its mark. The enemy had equipped themselves with bows and put up a barrier. Instead of loosing their remaining charges of the curse, they had evidently worked out another method of attack.

Twenty wyverns appeared in the sky overhead.

The creatures circled the area for a while before several of them sensed something and whirled back toward a forest that held Farsasian soldiers.

“That’s not good,” Oscar remarked, though his tone remained dry and unconcerned as he issued orders to his troops.

Things were still going according to plan.

Far in the distance, he saw the utterly unaware royal forces of Druza come into view.

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The mages fell into a panic at the sudden loss of one of their own.

However, a roar from the old mage put an end to it. “Where did that come from?!”

“I—I think from that forest over there…,” a soldier replied, cowed by the elderly magic user’s thunderous expression, pointing at a cluster of trees in the distance.

The old mage shot a venomous look, then sucked in a deep breath and straightened up. He turned and chanted the curse incantation, after which another black vortex erupted forth.

Stifling, noxious gas flowed through the air, and several people covered their mouths. The temperature dropped—a lingering aftereffect.

Just like with the fortress, a dark sphere absorbed the forest. In its place, an ebony fog materialized in the stagnant air.

“Did that do it?”

“Put up a barrier!”

Just as a mage finished the incantation, an arrow hit the barrier. Everyone’s faces fell at the sound of another uninhibited shot. The forbidden curse they wielded had a limited number of uses. They couldn’t waste any.

“Damn them…,” grumbled the old man, gritting his teeth before starting up a different incantation. In response to his words, wyverns began to pop into the sky. He calmed his frantic breathing and yelled orders to the creatures. “Burn the hiding soldiers to a crisp!”

As ordered, the wyverns circled slowly in the sky before swooping toward a patch of woods in the northwest. Grinning, the elderly mage placed his hand on the crystal again.

However, a soldier interrupted with a shout. “His Majesty is here! We can’t fire now!”

Well-organized Druzan troops had marched up just behind the forest that the old mage was about to target.

It was then that everyone realized what this meant—all of this was Farsas’s plan.

“Get word to the king! It’s an ambush!” cried a soldier, and the woman rushed to cast a transmission spell.

However, that was when Farsasian forces appeared from deeper in the trees and opened fire on the Druzan troops’ flank.

Stupefied for a moment, the woman let the spell vanish. The others in her party were similarly stupefied and caught unawares.

As though on cue, Als and a group of mages teleported in behind them.

Seizing the element of surprise, Als cut down the Druzan guards before him and then pressed in. “Neutralize any spell casters.”

Their mission was to obtain the crystal, the core of the forbidden curse.

Tinasha had informed them ahead of time about the curse’s range, that core, and its danger.

Oscar’s plan was three-pronged. The first objective was to get the enemy to waste as many shots of the curse as possible. The second was to lure in the Druzan army and leave them with no excuse while at the same time using them as a shield from the curse. The third was to steal the core.

“There’s no need for us to just take all the curse’s hits,” the new king had said wearily before sacrificing the empty fortress of Ynureid.

Then there was Tinasha, who sent a covert message to say, “I can’t do anything about a core with a full five charges, but there’s a way to disarm it if a few of its shots have been expended. Once you’ve stolen the core, get it to me.”

Even after leaving, she had offered her assistance. To Als, that was a kindness Farsas could never repay; he felt both guilty about it as well as incredibly touched. Tinasha kept her involvement a secret from Oscar, but it was possible that the perceptive king was already aware and simply not mentioning it outright.

Trapped by an ambush, the Druzan soldiers fell one after another, unable to put up even a token amount of resistance.

From behind, the old man’s face twisted in rage as balls of fire manifested in both his hands. The other curse users started incantations, too.

“Begone, Farsas scum!” cried the old mage as he launched his spells. Yet before they could strike Als, they hit a barrier and dissipated. Immediately, Kav set to the task of erecting another magical shield.

Als kept gaining ground, swinging his sword in a deadly arc. Two Druzan mages fell to Farsas warriors and crumpled to the ground, their blood soaking the plains.

Amid the death and pandemonium, a hoarse cry rang out. “Run!”

No one knew whose voice it was, but Als watched as the man holding the crystal and the woman next to him vanished into thin air.

The general swore angrily that he hadn’t fully carried out his mission. “Contact Master Kumu.”

Kav nodded. Als shook his sword clean of blood. Ahead, he watched the two armies clash violently.

In the sky, the wyverns were breathing fire indiscriminately, which the mages of Farsas staved off with defensive barriers. The king’s red dragon, enchanted with magical protection, was engaged in an aerial battle with several wyverns. The black wyverns’ fire blasts had such an extensive range that even the Druzans were suffering casualties from them. Coupled with the shock of the surprise attack, they were barely standing their ground.

It was probably only a matter of time before the enemy fled.

Having delivered the message, Kav nodded, and Als surveyed the battlefield.

Tiny figures had appeared in the distance.

Als squinted to try to make out who it was, then felt his blood run cold with fright.

The two people who had teleported away to the south side of the plain were left speechless. The Druzan defeat was obvious even this far away.

From the very start, they'd been dancing atop Farsas's hand.

They had destroyed a fortress, but it appeared that, too, had been part of their enemy's strategy.

"Let's get out of here. We'll wait for another chance and attack again."

"When?! Our master is dead, and we can't make another forbidden curse! Do you realize how many years it took to make this one?" the woman cried in outrage, wresting the crystal away from the man.

Four centuries ago, Molcado had arrived in Druza. It had taken hundreds of years to complete this forbidden curse, and the woman didn't want it to all be for naught.

No cost was too steep if it meant results.

Hatred bled from the crystal, melding together with the woman's own.

Her eyes, blazing with fury, scanned over the battlefield until they landed on where the two armies had met. With her gaze transfixed, she brought herself up straight. She raised the crystal in one hand, then placed her other palm atop it.

The man next to her blanched. "What are you…? You'll kill the king, too! Stop!"

"Shut up! We can always get another ruler! I am going to burn Farsas to the ground!"

Madness had long since claimed the woman's mind, yet she smiled, unaware how far into the pit she had descended. Magic gathered in her grip.

The man threw her an aghast look. Then, after a beat, he let out a long exhale. Unsure if he felt determined or just resigned, he reached out to touch the crystal. "Fine. Let's do it."

A smile worked its way across the woman's face. Those lost to their own power would become that power.

She had already ceased to be a person and was now only a deadly weapon.

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"Two mages got away with the core," Kumu reported.

"Damn that Als, I'll have to give him a lecture," muttered Oscar. He was on the front lines in Als's place, and Kumu was right behind him, providing him protection.

Every so often, flames from the wyverns blazed across the area, but it never reached them. Oscar glanced at the sky, checking to see that Nark was still pulverizing the wyverns.

The Druzan army continued its desperate resistance, but even in a head-on fight, Farsas had more soldiers. It was obvious that once the tension holding them together broke, they would fall apart.

Rodion was in the center of the army, and Oscar wanted to kill him or take him prisoner if at all possible. That would clinch Druza's defeat.

Unlike Oscar, Rodion was unlikely to risk an appearance on the front line. He was somewhere deep inside his army, protected by a contingent of guards. As Oscar stabbed and slashed with his sword, he scoured all around.

Then he saw it.

At the same time, Kumu began an incantation. The furious roar of the king of Farsas echoed across the plain, so loud it rang in one's ears.

"Fall back!"

A dozen or so mages in the rear hurriedly began to form spells. Doan, who was among them, turned pale as he realized what was happening. In the distance stood two small silhouettes. Some manner of huge, black, sinister magical power formed around them.

Though the soldiers were confused by their king's order, they started to retreat. That was when a dark, violent rush of power streamed out from the two faraway figures. The maelstrom that was a forbidden curse emitted an ear-piercing shriek as it whirled toward the battlefield. Aware of some sort of change, a Druzan general on horseback turned around to look and said wonderingly, "What in the world?"

Before he could answer, the general and his troops were swallowed up by the curse.

The black torrent raced forward, massacring a third of the Druzan troops and several wyverns. Just before it could pounce upon the Farsasian troops, however, it stopped.

There stood Oscar, a disgusted look on his face, wielding Akashia against the mass of wicked energy.

The curse, which struck the magic-neutralizing sword just before it could turn into a black orb, disintegrated little by little with loud screeching, grinding sounds. A huge barrier thrown up by the mages working together held back the ebony force that pressed in on the king from either side, trying to consume him without touching the sword.

From the point where it was touching Akashia, the curse turned to black mist and scattered.

Oscar suppressed a pained moan, eyes focused ahead all the while. His whole body was under so much pressure it threatened to crush him to death. It took all his strength merely to hold out against the curse.

He didn't know how long the mages at his back could keep the barrier up.

With great effort, Oscar placed his left hand on the middle part of the sword. While pushing Akashia outward, he rotated it slightly. Sharp pain lanced through his arms, and he thought he heard the snap of bone.

But just then, the landscape finally cleared, and Oscar could see the horizon again. The curse had been dispelled.

The king inspected his broken left arm. Cold sweat ran down his forehead, but he felt too euphoric from battle to notice much pain. Pressing against his damaged limb, he turned around. “Can you heal it?”

“In a makeshift way,” answered Kumu.

“Do it, then.”

Kumu looked pallid, but he placed a hand on Oscar’s arm and chanted. The chief mage was still trembling after experiencing the overwhelming power of the forbidden curse.

In the end, their barrier hadn’t held out against the attack.

Right at the end, a silver-threaded spell configuration had shone on Oscar’s body, supporting the barrier from the inside.

This was not something any of them had applied to the king. He must have been enchanted beforehand. Kumu felt endlessly thankful for the aid rendered by a certain someone not present.

“I’ve secured it and applied a painkiller. Don’t do anything to aggravate it…”

“Got it. Ettard, lead a third of the troops to pursue the Druzan army. Take down all remaining soldiers.”

In truth, Oscar wanted to get his forces out, but that might invite those with the forbidden curse to fire again. Ettard, looking much the same as Kumu, bowed.

Doan shouted, “Another one is coming!”

A jolt ran through the gathered forces. Those capable began to work protective magic.

“Two left…,” Oscar muttered, grimacing as he turned back to face the curse.

The inky, swirling vortex barreled straight for him. Oscar’s horse balked in fear. He soothed it by using one hand to stroke its mane even as he held Akashia aloft once more.

Dark magic blotted out his vision. A choking, cloying pressure assailed his whole form.

Can I endure this?

Doubts ran through his mind, but he couldn’t allow himself to entertain them.

Never before in history had a forbidden curse determined the outcome of a war. Moreover, this was Farsas, one of the most prominent nations in all the land, as well as the home of Akashia. If they couldn’t hold their ground here, a number of countries might start working on their own forbidden curses.

Such a development could influence the future. It wasn't a question of whether Oscar *could* do it. He *had* to.

"…"

An audible crack sounded from his body.

Oscar could barely move his left arm. Backlash from dismantling the magic shocked through his right hand.

The hilt of the sword finally slipped from his tight grasp.

Uh-oh.

The king hurried to grab ahold of it by the blade.

Unfortunately, his fingers hardly obeyed him anymore. Blood ran down the sword.

Sinister magical power reached for him.

The end was nigh.

Yet from behind, Oscar felt someone appear without warning.

The debilitating pressure vanished. Whoever it was leaned against his back; they were most likely sitting on the saddle behind him. Warmth flooded in, healing Oscar's flesh and bones in the blink of an eye.

His eyes widened in shock, but right away he broke into a rueful grin. The curse was still right there before his eyes, but a mysterious sense of relief was sweeping through him. He used his restored left hand to hold Akashia back up.

Still gazing straight ahead, Oscar spoke to the familiar presence behind him, "I thought you hated me now."

"I do. And I don't want to see your face, either, so don't turn around," came the prickly reply in a clear, beautiful voice. He had to suppress the urge to burst out laughing.

Oscar's body felt light and free. He cleared away the curse, cleaving through the black vortex and reducing it to dust.

There were murmurs behind him. After checking that his right hand was free of injury, he wrapped it around Akashia once more. "How come you're here?"

In a peevish tone, Tinasha answered, "I've grown used to that personality of yours."

She fell silent for a little while.

When she spoke next, her tone was different, as though she was making a proclamation or perhaps saying a prayer. "Even if you forget, even if I forget, even if history changes, and we redo things time and time again—I am your protector. That will never change."

The words sank deep into Oscar's heart, like pure water. His chest ached a little at how straightforward it was. He opened his mouth to reply, but she cut in smoothly. "The next round is almost here."

Oscar nodded. He could see a black mass forming in the distance.

"By the way, can you see magic spells?" she asked.

"I can't."

“Hmm… Well then, I’ll lend you my eyesight this time,” she replied. Instantaneously, Oscar’s vision changed, startling him.

The scene before him looked the same at first, yet here and there, he saw strange lines and glowing lights. He let out a heavy sigh upon spotting the five black rings comprising the forbidden curse, as well as the brightness of the white light enveloping him.

Softly, she questioned, “Can you see the rings?”

“Yes.”

“And the lines connected to it?”

“Yeah. I have to cut those?”

Tinasha giggled, which Oscar interpreted as assent and drew Akashia in. He took aim at the forbidden curse as it winged its way over to him.

The king didn’t falter in the slightest. With a harsh exhale, he cut the black spell apart.

The intricately intertwined configuration dispersed in a flash.

Without its spell framework, the curse faded away like some sort of apparition.

Compared to the previous two times, it felt almost anticlimactic. Oscar wanted to groan over how much he had suffered before using different methods.

Oscar was about to say something to the woman behind him, but he realized she had disappeared. He whirled around only to see Kumu staring back at him with wide eyes.

“Where’s Tinasha?” Oscar asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“She was just here, wasn’t she?”

“N-no, no one was there,” Kumu answered.

Oscar’s eyes grew wide. He played back what had just happened, wondering if he had only imagined it.

However, there was no way. He wouldn’t have been able to break down the forbidden curse so easily without her.

Looking down at his entirely uninjured body, Oscar laughed out loud.

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Clutching the orb, its dark miasma now thinned, the woman stood rooted in place.

Never had she expected that someone could defend against three shots from the curse. The power in her hands should have been absolute, and now that it was gone, she could do nothing but stare into the distance in a daze.

All of the sudden, the man tapped her shoulder. “We need to go. They’re coming.”

Als and his soldiers, the same ones who had slain the old mage, were galloping toward them on horseback.

Gritting her teeth, the woman stared at the enemy. She held the orb aloft, touching a hand to its cold surface.

Guessing her intent, the man's face went white as a sheet. He reached out to stop her. "Don't! Releasing unshaped magic will lead to danger!"

"Shut up!" she yelled, shaking him off.

"Come forth… Devour them!"

A black smear sputtered out of the crystal, responding to the magic she poured into it. Unlike the previous times, it had no clear shape and oozed out all over. Where the stain touched, grass withered, and some incomparable stench wafted forth.

The man went still. If they didn't flee, they would be in danger, too.

He tried to call up a teleportation spell but then noticed the smear drifting toward a single point in the air. That place sucked in the thick miasma of resentment and diverted it away.

As the two watched, stunned by the incomprehensible sight, nearly the entire stain vanished. In its place appeared a woman.

She had long hair as black as night—and skin like porcelain. Floating in the air as she was, her mere existence seemed a beauteous thing.

Her eyes were closed, and they slowly opened to reveal dark irises.

She smiled down bewitchingly at the pair on the ground. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance… I am the twelfth ruler of Tuldarr, Tinasha As Meyer Ur Aeterna Tuldarr. Am I correct in my assumption that you have inherited the spell craft and crimes of the convict Molcado?"

Her gaze felt arresting—it bored into the two mages, drawing them close to the depths of the abyss.

They were terrified to hear her name.

"Th-the Witch Killer Queen…"

"…Here in the flesh…?"

The queen outstretched a hand toward them. As they watched magic congeal within her beguiling figure, any doubt the two had about the woman's identity faded.

Her voice echoed in the air, not unlike the sound of a slender flute. "If you have no objections to that fact, then prepare for your punishment. This is the end."

The mage woman had lost everything, and she closed her eyes in the face of her bitter defeat. A white light seared her eyelids.

And then she ceased to exist.

King Rodion of Druza, who managed to escape the free-for-all battle, rode with a handful of soldiers back toward the border.

The result of his experimental foray was an extraordinarily crushing defeat. He cursed the mages. "Damn them! All talk! Couldn't live up to what they claimed! Not only did Farsas come out unscathed, our own army got dragged in, too!"

Pondering his revenge, Rodion ground his teeth. His horse suddenly came to a stop, and he pitched forward slightly. He managed to hold tight to the reins and not get thrown off.

His guards had halted, too.

“What’s going on?! Go!” he ordered, kicking at his steed’s flanks. Yet it wouldn’t budge. Checking behind him, Rodion saw that there was a Farsasian battalion chasing them down.

“Dammit! Move, damn you!” Rodion cried, drawing his sword. But a fierce burst of pain lanced through his arm. Instinctively, he dropped the sword.

As it fell to the ground, he heard a girl’s amused voice, though there was no one around. “The queen said she would have let you go, had you not used the forbidden curse.”

“Who’s there?!”

No one answered. The giggling had ceased.

Swords drawn, the group of Farsasian pursuers gained on him from behind.

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“It looks like Farsas won. All that remains is for them to clean up,” the mystical spirit girl mocked idly.

“That’s because the Farsas army is much stronger. If not for the forbidden curse, it wouldn’t have even been a question,” responded the mage who was the crowning jewel of Tuldarr.

Both were hovering in the air above the battlefield, lazily watching things play out and offering their thoughts.

The woman eyed the areas enshrouded in black mist and sighed. “Let’s divert the fog away from those two spots before we return.”

“We could just leave it be, you know. You’re so conscientious, Lady Tinasha,” remarked the spirit girl.

“I can’t let it sit there…,” said Tinasha, raking her fingers up and back through her hair. First, she teleported above the former site of Ynureid. After a lengthy incantation of several minutes, she pushed away the magic stuck to that spot.

“One more left…,” Tinasha muttered, sounding hassled, and she warped to a position over where the land was still thick with ebony remnants.

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The army reconvened, bringing reports from every corner. Mixed in among these was word that King Rodion of Druza had been killed. Oscar didn’t so much as raise an eyebrow upon hearing of the abrupt demise of an enemy ruler; he merely nodded.

Als came last to give his account, dismounting from his horse and bowing to Oscar. “The two mages wielding the forbidden curse died.”

“Did you kill them?” Oscar asked.

Als grimaced. Scratching at his head, he answered, “No, she…”

He trailed off vaguely, but Oscar understood. The king looked all around, then cocked his head thoughtfully.

“Your Majesty?” Als inquired.

“Nothing. Gather up the troops and have half make camp here. Send the others back to the castle,” Oscar ordered.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” responded Als.

In anticipation of the fortress’s destruction, an encampment had already been established a short distance away. Soldiers would be stationed there from now on as they awaited Ynureid’s rebuilding.

After giving other directions for post-battle cleanup, Oscar rode away on horseback. Nark flew back to his shoulder, like it had been waiting for him. Doan and several soldiers followed after the king, flustered by his sudden departure.

Oscar stopped his horse close by the patch of woods annihilated by the curse and looked at the sky.

There was nothing there. Doan frowned, puzzled.

“Tinasha! I know you’re there. Come down,” Oscar shouted.

Before Doan understood what was happening, the lingering traces of ebony mist disappeared from the place. Looking again, he noticed that there was no longer any warping above the former site of the fortress, either.

A woman’s voice echoed from the sky. She sounded very displeased. “How could you tell? I was trying to be invisible.”

“Intuition,” Oscar replied.

“I really don’t like you…,” grumbled the formless voice before popping into view in the sky. She slowly descended, her silky black locks fluttering in the breeze.

Once she was eye level with Oscar, a sarcastic grin twisted her features as she cocked her head to one side. “Did I not tell you that I don’t want to see your face?”

“I do seem to recall hearing that,” Oscar teased, a wry smile on his lips at the confirmation that it had, in fact, been her back there and not some phantom.

Tinasha, on the other hand, had her arms crossed and was scowling. Oscar, who hadn’t really seen her look like this before, felt oddly charmed.

“Well, whatever… It’s not very likely that you’ll change your behavior because I tell you to. And I’m not holding out hope for some miraculous improvement, either. Do what you want.”

“I *am* doing what I want, come to think of it,” remarked Oscar, beckoning Tinasha close. A glower on her face, Tinasha still edged nearer. He cupped her face in his hands and stared into her dark eyes. “You saved us. Thank you.”

Surprise flickered in her gaze. Evidently, she hadn't expected him to say that. Embarrassed, Tinasha looked away and muttered, "It's nothing you need to thank me for. I was only meddling."

"I wanted to give my gratitude, so I did. And also…I'm sorry. About before," he admitted.

"It's fine. I was being clingy. Naturally, it turned you off," mumbled Tinasha.

"I don't think that's exactly what I said…"

"And just for the record, I never tried to press you into marrying me either!" she insisted.

"*Do* you want to marry me?" Oscar questioned.

"You don't mean it, so don't ask me something like that," Tinasha huffed, jerking her head to one side in an obvious pout.

Grinning, Oscar pulled her into his arms and sat her down before him in the saddle. He gave a light poke to her sulky face. "Hmm… It's not my style to have someone save me. Too one-sided. I'm going to save you, like you saved me. So feel free to act as you like. I've left your room in the castle as it was."

Tinasha's head popped up to boggle at the king. But right away, her cheeks puffed out and her brow knit. "Do you think I'll just forgive you no matter what? Am I supposed to just happily run back to you?"

"I don't think that at all. You don't want to see my face, after all." Oscar broke into laughter.

His mood had soared. It didn't matter that Tinasha was going to leave in the end.

This didn't mean he wanted to have her for his own. He had just come to like her.

Oscar found Tinasha entertaining and wished she would simply be herself. He wanted to see her flying freely.

That was all it was right now, and he expected he'd be fine with that.

Tinasha stared at him in disgust as he laughed. But then she let out a little sigh and broke into a smile. She leaned back against him, making sure he couldn't see her face, and then dimpled happily. "Fine. I'm well aware that I'll end up as your plaything. I'll stay within your reach."

"Hmm, but you're the one who made me your toy long ago," Oscar shot back nonchalantly.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tinasha huffed, clicking her tongue in vexation.

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Despite the relatively small scope of the battle, Druza's use of a forbidden curse sent ripples through other countries. This would be an indelible mark on history.

Druza, left with no heirs, split into two. The western side, which shared a border with Tuldarr, became a dependent territory of the Magic Empire.

The major powers of the mainland signed a treaty agreeing to ban use of forbidden curses in battle.

No records mentioned a mage from Tuldarr standing behind the king of Farsas as he destroyed the forbidden curse.

There were few at the battle who knew of that truth, and it was quickly relegated to the shadows of history.

7. Song of the Spinning Wheel

One afternoon, as temperatures edged higher and higher by the day, a woman floated upside down from the ceiling in the king of Farsas's study. Her long black hair was bound in a ponytail, and she was dressed in the same type of simple, light clothing that a child might wear. Even so, this was unmistakably a royal of Tuldarr. Her head hanging listlessly, she asked the room's owner, "It's…so hot… Can I make it cooler in here?"

"Sure, but is it really that bad?"

"This is basically my first time being outside of Tuldarr…," Tinasha reminded him, using magic to lower the temperature in the room somewhat. She descended to the floor in a lazy spiral.

Farsas and Tuldarr were neighbors, but the capital of Farsas was much warmer than that of Tuldarr, which was located farther north and at a high elevation. Moreover, Farsas was a naturally warm country. For someone raised in a cooler place like Tinasha had been, it was rough. The refreshing drop in temperature made Lazar look up from the documents he was sorting.

His eyes on his paperwork, Oscar said, "Since you've come and joined us on land, make some tea."

"I admire you for being able to drink hot tea in this weather," Tinasha replied. The tea things were already laid out alongside the wall, so she set to the task. Next to those implements sat a pitcher of cold water, which had been placed there for her benefit several days ago.

More than two weeks had passed since the conflict with Druza, and Tinasha had spent it commuting between her own country and Farsas. Roughly two-thirds of that time—about ten days—she'd been in Farsas. She returned to Tuldarr once every three days to prepare for her coronation.

However, she hadn't departed for her homeland at all this week. Realizing this, Oscar cocked his head at her. "You've been hanging around here a lot lately. Did something happen with your analysis?"

"Uh… I'm a little stuck. There's a part I just can't make sense of…"

"Oh?"

“You could say this is a bit of a break for me. Maybe it’ll help me come up with something,” she said, then lifted off into the air again. She turned around several times in the air, knees bent.

Oscar smiled, not looking up from his papers. “You could just give up.”

“I won’t! Just wait a little longer,” she insisted.

“Well, if it doesn’t work out, you’ll have my child, right?”

“Yes. Once I’ve imprinted on the baby that their father has a *terrible* personality, I’ll hand them over to you.”

“You’ve got a hell of a personality yourself,” Oscar retorted.

Lazar frowned, sensing something loaded beneath the surface of these playful jokes.

Tinasha was destined to become the queen of a neighboring nation. From a diplomatic standpoint, she would want to avoid giving birth to the next heir of the Farsas throne. Surely Oscar understood that, too, but it did nothing to assuage the worries of the king’s attendant.

Tinasha dropped back to the floor again and started to pour perfectly steamed tea into cups. She placed a cup of the light-crimson liquid on the study desk and stared intently at Oscar. “If it’s a girl, I would keep it.”

“I don’t care if it’s a boy or a girl,” he answered.

“That’s unexpected. But it wouldn’t be up to you.”

While they were definitely joking, the topic was still straying into rather specific territory. Alarmed, Lazar waved his arms in the air. “B-but you’re still analyzing the curse!”

“Yes, I am! I had almost forgotten! I’m working very hard on it!” Tinasha cried.

“Got it, got it. Do your best, then,” stated Oscar dismissively, reaching out for his cup and taking a sip. A pleasant scent wafted up from the steam. He set his stack of papers down for the moment and looked to Lazar next to him. “Heard anything interesting lately? I could use some exercise.”

“Even if I had, I wouldn’t offer aught that would tempt you to sneak out,” Lazar admitted primly. “But if I must, I’ll tell you that there’s rumors of a strange religious cult in the city.”

“A *cult*?” Oscar replied, his interest piqued.

Lazar gave a simple explanation of what he knew.

About a month ago, a faith worshipping a new deity—not one of the existing gods—had formed in the city. It steadily gathered believers while taking root in town.

“A new god? What kind?” Oscar pressed.

“Evidently, only believers find that out. It seems to be a religion that prizes power above all else,” Lazar answered.

“Dangerous ideas, then,” Tinasha remarked coolly, now seated in a chair.

Farsas enjoyed freedom of religion, but most people believed in the same deities of antiquity, such as Aeti. People worshipped the statues of those gods in the castle cathedral and at the eastern temple.

Tuldarr, on the other hand, was an atheistic nation; as might be expected from a country of mages. Its castle cathedral had an altar, but no statues or idols were present.

Oscar rested his chin in one hand, sounding displeased as he asked, “Should we investigate this?”

“Nothing suspicious has occurred. At most, those around the cult consider it a mere nuisance,” Lazar pointed out.

“I see…,” Oscar responded, finishing his tea and setting down the empty cup. The liquid had cooled quickly, most likely due to the lowered temperature in the room. Tinasha, however, got up and reached for the water pitcher, still feeling hot.

As she poured for herself, she recalled something and said, “Oh, right, I have plans with Legis tonight, so I’ll be heading back to Tuldarr.”

“Did that slip your mind until just now?” Oscar questioned skeptically.

“I—I didn’t forget, exactly… I learn a lot when I’m around him. His disposition is fairly different from yours, but he has the makings of a fine king,” she explained.

Oscar, having just been indirectly judged, frowned. It was partially because he didn’t care for how close Tinasha was to Legis, but that was a trivial concern. The thing that vexed him more was how she spoke of Legis like he’d be king, when she was the one currently set to rule Tuldarr.

“You’re talking like Legis is going to rule,” he remarked.

“Is that what you got from that?” Tinasha replied with a devious grin. Though she had been asleep for four hundred years, physically she was still nineteen years old. Legis was currently twenty-three, meaning that there was no way he could become king after her, barring unforeseen events.

Oscar found that suspicious but decided not to press the issue further. Tinasha was, after all, a young queen who had abdicated once before. No one could say what would happen in the future, and the same went for Oscar, who was a youthful king himself.

Tinasha took a sip of water from her cup, then her eyes bulged with shock, and she poured the contents of the cup back into the pitcher. After observing that, Oscar asked her, “What is it?”

“Nothing, just… It’s poisoned,” she answered, sounding unconcerned. Both men blanched upon hearing that. Oscar kicked his chair back as he stood up and ran over to her. He grabbed Tinasha’s chin in one hand and used the other to try to stick fingers down her throat to force her to vomit.

She rushed to stop him. “W-wait, wait! Magic potions don’t work on me!”

“…So you’re really fine?”

“I am,” Tinasha assured, the man’s fingers half in her mouth, her eyes watering.

Oscar trusted that and released her. The young woman massaged her neck. “The magic in my body is so powerful that it disintegrates normal potions, even enchanted ones. An ordinary person would die if they drank that, but it was nothing more than foul-tasting water to me.”

“That’s good, then… No, no, it’s not,” Oscar replied.

That pitcher was there specifically for Tinasha. Oscar had never touched it, and neither had Lazar, the two only partaking of tea. If things had gone badly, they could have had an international crisis on their hands.

But Tinasha, the victim of the lethal-poisoning attempt, folded her arms calmly. “There’s no end to the list of reasons why someone might want to kill me. I can’t make a guess, but based on the fact that they used a magic potion, this must be someone who thinks I’m an ordinary princess.”

“I’ll investigate. In the meantime, keep up a defensive barrier around yourself at all times,” Oscar instructed.

“All right,” Tinasha agreed.

“Sorry about this,” the king muttered, patting her head lightly as he issued orders to Lazar. Though the other man paled when he heard them, he set to the task immediately. Once the door closed behind him, Oscar sighed. “If you’re not opposed, it would be best if you stayed in Tuldarr until we know who’s responsible for this.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m more worried about you, so I’ll come back tomorrow,” Tinasha said, offering him a smile with her eyes narrowed.

The sight of it tempted Oscar into drawing her into his arms. But instead, he pinched her cheek.

“Ow! What was that for?!” she yelped indignantly.

“No reason,” he replied.

Narrowing her eyes at his irrational behavior, she glared at him as he smirked back at her.

※

As the sun was setting, Tinasha used the transportation array that linked her rooms in each castle to return to Tuldarr.

Oscar was gravely concerned over the attempted poisoning, but Tinasha had been living with the danger of assassination since she was young. To her, it was nothing to fuss over. There were a multitude of reasons for someone to kill another.

After changing her clothes, Tinasha went to the reference library where Legis was waiting for her.

Today she had agreed to help him look through the materials that were not for loan and put them in order.

Many materials were for in-library use only, and the two planned to go through the most prohibited of all—those related to forbidden curses. Only the chief mage and royal family members of Tuldarr were allowed to peruse those volumes. While there weren’t very many, Tuldarr had still accumulated a few over the course of its nearly nine-hundred-year history.

Any new additions were placed with the rest, but they had not been sorted or organized.

The matter with Druza the previous month made Legis realize the importance of these tomes, thus he had persuaded the king and obtained permission to read and sort them.

Tinasha reached the reference library, dismissed the guards, and entered.

At a cursory glance, the reference library was a book-storage room lined wall-to-wall with shelves. She crossed the chamber packed with volumes and documents and touched a door on the far wall. It reacted to her royal contact and soundlessly opened inward. Beyond it stood Legis, his back to her and an old scroll in his hands.

He noticed the door opening and turned around. “Sorry to make you come here. I thought it would look a little suspicious for me to do this alone.”

“No, not at all. I’m curious, myself, so let me help,” she reassured him.

The two spread out the forbidden curse materials on a large desk. After Tinasha skimmed through all fifteen books, she said, “These seven detail countermeasures, and they look like they could be useful depending on the situation. I’ll set them down in writing later. This one, this one, and this one… I think we should destroy. They’re too dangerous. Also, these two assert a fundamentally incorrect interpretation of the rules of magic. We can destroy those as well. As for the last three, they aren’t anything threatening, so we can leave them alone.”

Nodding, Legis sorted the volumes as Tinasha advised, then locked the materials marked for destruction in a magically sealed box. After obtaining the king’s permission, these would be eradicated.

Tinasha picked up the most recent addition of the fifteen, a document from fifteen years ago. Written by a Tuldarr mage, it delineated a large-scale curse that could be used to target a major city.

In Tinasha’s eyes, however, it was nothing but impractical theorizing. The only one who could craft a spell like this alone would be her or a witch. And any who became a mage that powerful wouldn’t need a spell written by someone else. The nature of curses also meant one couldn’t be invoked by multiple spell casters.

“I acknowledge their enthusiasm, though…,” Tinasha whispered to herself with a faint smile as she helped Legis stow the documents.

The *truly* dangerous spells couldn’t be found scribed anywhere, even in a secluded place like this.

There were no written accounts of the magic and incident that had nearly brought disaster to the country four hundred years ago. Tinasha had witnessed it firsthand, however. She understood that so long as there were those who sought vast power to overturn the established order, a forbidden curse could arise at any moment.

She, perhaps better than anyone else, knew that such things could never be allowed.

After leaving the reference library, Tinasha and Legis sat down to dinner.

King Calste was out on an inspection of the territory annexed from Druza, so the two of them were alone at the long formal dining table.

Seated directly across from her, Legis asked, “How’s Farsas?”

“Hot. I can’t believe it isn’t even summer yet there,” she said with a sigh, shaking her head. Legis laughed.

Internally, Tinasha was relieved to see his reaction. She would never dream of telling Legis she had been poisoned that afternoon. It could mean her being banned from returning to Farsas. Tinasha smiled, though it was a rather shallow one.

Legis changed the subject to recent events in Druza. However, discussing the wyverns apparently made him think of something. “Oh yes, were you the one who gave that dragon to the king of Farsas?”

“I did, because Nark was originally his to begin with,” Tinasha answered reflexively. She realized her slip of the tongue when Legis’s expression changed to one of wary suspicion. Tinasha prayed Legis would let it slide. Unfortunately, he did not.

“What do you mean by that? I thought that dragon was something you brought with you from four hundred years ago. You told us that you were waiting for the ‘*Akashia swordsman*,’ but why him in particular? Records state that a king of Farsas from three generations ago visited Tuldarr, but he couldn’t get past the door underground.”

The questions kept coming, and Tinasha hung her head in shame like a child caught playing tricks.

She and Mila had discussed her reason for waiting until this era in particular in front of Legis before, but they had omitted the part about the man from the future. It had never been explained to Legis in full.

All he knew was that for some ambiguous reason related to settling a debt, Tinasha had waited until this time period. Legis thought she was aiding Oscar purely because he happened to be the one who woke her up.

Legis’s gaze, while not piercing, remained steadfastly trained on her. Making up her mind, Tinasha had everyone else cleared from the room. Solemnly, she began to speak. “I’m not sure if you’ll believe this, but…he saved me when I was young.”

“What?”

“To make a long story short…he was the one who traveled through time first. Backward, that is…”

Legis’s eyes grew wide. Indeed, he must have found it difficult to believe. No rule of magic even suggested returning to the past was possible. It wasn’t an issue of magical power—the act was simply impossible. Not even high-ranking demons were exempt from this law.

Tinasha went on, “As Oscar is now, he has no memory of that. When he saved me, it altered the course of history… He left Nark in my room. Evidently, I was originally the one to give it to him. That me isn’t the one who exists now, so I don’t have any memory of that, of course.”

The young woman winced a little as she elaborated, and Legis shook his head. After a little while, he summarized the astounding story he had just heard. “The king of Farsas met another version of you and received the dragon from her…and then after that, he traveled to the past and gave the dragon to your younger self?”

“Yes.”

“Is our king of Farsas really the same person as the one who did that?” Legis asked.

“I understand your doubt, but he truly is. Nark knows it, and I do, too,” Tinasha stated.

With a long sigh, Legis readjusted his sitting posture.

If this was true, it would shake the very foundations of magic research.

Any mage would laugh this story off as a fairy tale. However, the person telling Legis this was one of the most renowned queens in Tuldarr’s history.

“Have you told him…?” Legis inquired.

“No. It doesn’t have anything to do with his current self. He’s already gotten mad at me once before—told me not to look at him with such a faraway gaze,” Tinasha admitted, her eyes turning the tiniest bit lonely and distant. That separation encompassed four hundred years.

That unforgettable time now only existed as fragments inside the young woman’s mind.

After dinner, Legis parted from Tinasha and walked back alone through the hallways, refusing a guard escort.

He couldn’t help letting out a sigh.

Tinasha had revealed that not even she knew by what method Oscar had gone back in time. She herself had only been half convinced until waking and meeting him again.

And yet she had smiled when she said, “It’s possible that it was my previous self who undid his curse. That alone makes coming here worth it.”

Legis could only agree. He never dreamed Tinasha had been through such an astounding experience—nor that Oscar had always been so dear to her. Her casting aside everything and sleeping for centuries was all connected to him.

“Can I really compete with that?”

Legis smiled, his eyes downcast. There was a twinge of bitterness mixed into his expression.

Curiously, he didn’t feel annoyed. So long as she had a happy smile on her face, that sufficed. She was the legendary queen he had admired since he was a boy. When he met her in the flesh, he was surprised by her soft, open smile. In real life, she was quite adorable, and he found himself attracted to her.

And besides, the fight hadn’t begun yet. All she had was one memory from early adolescence. It wasn’t even one Oscar shared. That wasn’t enough yet for him to give up.

“Putting that aside, the idea of another version of her…”

Tinasha said she'd had to sleep for four hundred years to meet the Oscar who existed now.

So then how did her previous self meet his?

Considering how much magic Tinasha had, it was possible for her to use a magic sleep to survive for centuries. Even if she hadn't employed stasis, Tinasha had a woman's body, well adapted to magical power. It was conceivable that she could stay alive for well beyond a normal lifespan.

However, Legis only knew of one name for such a being. This symbolic word set apart women whose immense power made them feared and shunned.

As he pondered more and more, he closed his eyes even as he walked along.

That was when he felt someone touch his back, though he hadn't sensed any people nearby.

Suspicious, he whirled around instinctively. He started to concentrate magic in his right hand.

Yet a spell never materialized. He was plunged into the dark of night without even catching a glimpse of the face of the person behind him.

※

While she was still in the study, Tinasha ran a test to determine who had created the potion she had unwittingly imbibed. But the result was *created by an unknown person.*

That at least told her that whoever made the potion was not in the castle, but it was still unacceptable that someone could have dosed a drink provided by the castle so easily. Oscar launched a strict investigation into who had prepared that pitcher of water and who had set it in the room.

"A lady-in-waiting named Claris prepared the water and brought it in. She is thirty-six this year and has no family. She came to work in the castle five years ago," Lazar reported.

"Did she seem suspicious?" Oscar asked.

"Well, she claimed to know nothing, but she was acting evasive…"

"I'll meet with her myself later," Oscar replied, making no secret of his unhappiness with the contents of Lazar's account.

While Tinasha's stay in the castle was not public information, someone had still targeted this heir to the throne of a neighboring country. If this lady-in-waiting proved to be the culprit, an execution would await her no matter her reasons.

"Oh yeah, I haven't seen Tinasha around. Is she all right?" Oscar asked. At almost the same time, there was a knock on the door. Thinking it was her, Oscar told the person to enter, but he was surprised to find Tinasha's mystical spirit there instead of the woman herself.

“Lady Tinasha says to tell you she will not be returning today. This is confidential, but Prince Legis was attacked last night and is currently in a coma. She’ll be there in Tuldarr awhile to heal him,” Mila informed them.

Oscar and Lazar paled. In the span of one day, both heirs to the Tuldarr throne had been attacked.

“Do you know who did it?” Oscar questioned.

“No. Lady Tinasha was extremely angry and may tear the fugitive limb from limb when she finds them,” answered Mila. With a wave of her hand good-bye, she disappeared.

In shock, Lazar murmured, “I wonder if the same people are responsible for our case.”

“If they are, they have freakishly good execution,” Oscar remarked.

While Tuldarr and Farsas shared a border, the castles were still quite far apart. The distance wouldn’t be much for a mage who could use teleportation, but the attacks still came virtually back-to-back.

“What the hell is going on…? I thought all these mysterious plots had ended along with the Druza situation. Is it something else?”

Oscar rested his chin in one hand, pulling a face as he contemplated what in the world was happening.

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Legis’s assailant had enchanted him with two spells, one to induce sleep and another to keep him that way. The combination rendered him comatose.

Cursing the long-gone attacker, Tinasha set about stabilizing his physical condition and analyzing the spells. Because they were blended together, she had to inspect both simultaneously.

Calste, who had rushed back once he heard of his son’s accident, asked her, “How is it going, Lady Tinasha? Will you be able to work it out?”

As she continued her analysis, Tinasha answered, “I plan to have the pattern of the spell keeping his body comatose drawn out by tomorrow. At the longest, this will take three weeks. It might take less time if we catch who did this, though.”

“I’ll heighten our security. However, at present we’ve had no reports of an intruder…”

“This was carried out so well that someone on the inside may be involved. Do you know what projects Prince Legis was involved in recently?” she asked.

Calste brought a hand to his mouth thoughtfully. “The biggest would be the forbidden curse… The others are all on the smaller side. I’ll research everything and draft up a document.”

“Thank you. I’d appreciate that,” Tinasha responded.

After Calste left the room, the only ones remaining were two guard soldiers, Tinasha, and the unconscious Legis. Even in repose, his face exuded his noble upbringing. She glanced at him. “So long as you’re a

member of the royal family, this sort of thing is unfortunately to be expected…”

She tied her ink black hair up into a messy ponytail and held her left hand out over Legis’s body.

A spell configuration made of red threads floated up into the air.

Glaring at the array some unknown person had crafted, Tinasha began her incantation.

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After Oscar finished his work for the morning, he went to the room where the lady-in-waiting suspect was being held.

Claris shrank back to see that the king had come in person, bowing her head low.

Oscar got straight to the point. “Do you know why I’m here?”

“I-if this is about the poison, I don’t know anything…,” the woman muttered, her face cast down as she trembled in fear.

Eyeing Claris coldly, Oscar drew a chair over and sat down. He stared right into her eyes.

After inhaling deeply, the young king stated seriously yet calmly, “It’s not public information, so it’s understandable that you wouldn’t know, but I’ve asked that woman to do something very important for me. Her efforts concern the continued existence of the Farsas royal family. That’s why I keep her with me.”

“S-something very important…?” repeated Claris.

“Yes. Over the past fifteen years, everyone else has concluded it to be hopeless. She’s the only one who’s working hard to solve the issue. If an unfortunate event befell her, it wouldn’t just have a negative effect on Tuldarr. It would destroy the Farsas royal family.”

Claris’s jaw dropped. It sounded like a joke, but his gaze bored into her with its sincerity. It was also clear from his eyes that he was deeply displeased. A dawning sense of horror jolted through her whole body.

The blood drained from Claris’s face, and she clapped both hands over her mouth. She fell to the floor, whimpering. “I-I’m so very sorry. I never dreamed that would be the case…”

“Where did you get the poison?”

“A man in town I’d never seen before… He told me that Princess Tinasha is actually a witch and that she’s trying to seduce and deceive Your Majesty… He also explained that because she’s a witch, the poison wouldn’t kill her…”

Annoyed, Oscar clicked his tongue. He hadn’t thought Claris would have acted alone, but if she didn’t know who the mysterious instigator was, their trail would soon run dry. “Why did you believe a tale like that? I know she’s far from normal, but she’s not a witch. She’s a queen of Tuldarr.”

“I’m very sorry…” Claris sniffled, then broke into a sob and covered her face.

Who was the man who gave Claris the potion, and what was his goal? Did he know it would have no effect on Tinasha, or had that only been a lie to manipulate Claris? The more he thought about it, the more his head started to hurt.

“Doan will come to take your full testimony, so tell him everything. Even though you weren’t trying to kill her, that poison is still a lethal one. I hope you understand what that means for you,” Oscar said.

“O-of course…,” she whispered.

For a second, the king cast her a pitying look, but those feelings dissipated instantly.

Even if Tinasha consented to him pardoning her, some things should never be forgiven so ambiguously. He knew very well what his duty and his responsibility entailed.

After that, a written report about the man who deceived Claris was drafted based on her admissions.

He wore a mage’s robe pulled low over his eyes and said he hailed from Tuldarr. He called Tinasha the fifth witch who was sealed underneath the castle. Claris believed him after he showed her proof that Tinasha’s birth records were not in Tuldarr, despite her princess status.

“Well, of course they’re not. How did Legis explain it to foreign nations?”

“He asserted that Tinasha was a distant relative in the royal family tree and that her rich magical powers were why they made her heir to the throne…,” answered Lazar.

“And I suppose that if anyone looked into the matter, they’d discover there is no actual distant relative like her,” Oscar mused. He was about to say that Legis should have falsified some records but then remembered the prince was in a coma and held his tongue.

Doan continued with his report. “Claris stated she never saw the man’s face clearly. He spoke to her in the market and appeared to know she worked in the castle.”

“For now, scour the town for anyone matching that description. And check with all working in the castle to see if they’ve encountered suspicious characters lately,” ordered Oscar.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Doan replied, departing to see to the task.

With that enigmatic man at large, and no other leads, this case would end with Claris’s execution.

A new turning point for Farsas came four days after Tinasha was poisoned.

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A week after Legis had been ensorcelled, Tinasha was poring through his responsibilities as she worked on her analysis of the enchantment. In just

the past week, she had gone through more than fifty cases and projects he was involved in. She thought the link to his assailant might be among them.

Although she had taken over the things Legis was actively working on, the mages who worked under him were digging up information on the projects he had already completed. One of these, a man named Renart, came to report to Tinasha that he had completed his inspection.

"There was one suspicious thing. Last year, we had a change in chief mage. Evidently, His Highness had begun a second investigation of the new one," Renart explained.

Tinasha, who was mid-analysis, asked, "Was there something strange there?"

"I think he was in the process of checking as much. The new chief mage is a man named Lobros, and it's possible that His Highness suspected him of embezzling public funds. He was keeping tabs on Lobros's research expenses since becoming chief mage," Renart replied.

Tinasha paused in her work and crossed her arms. She turned around to face Renart. "So Legis didn't find any proof of embezzling?"

"It appears that way. I probed the matter myself, and nothing seemed outright corrupt," he answered.

"Give me your personal opinion. What kind of person is Lobros?"

"Short," Renart responded flatly.

Tinasha couldn't help but burst out laughing. Renart's subdued, apathetic personality made a very good impression on her. She had interacted with him many times over the past week, and she judged him capable and trustworthy. Tinasha had some comfort in the fact that at least she had found a good person to work with.

The future queen of Tuldarr brought a hand to her chin and flashed a smile full of the intimidating air she didn't normally reveal. "I've uncovered something good, too. I would have noticed it sooner had I prioritized my work on the enchantment."

"Which one is our top priority?" Renart asked.

"I would say both are. Let's set a little trap. No one's made any moves since Legis was attacked, so we can assume our enemy is on their best behavior. Let's shake things up a bit—until they *have* to act," proposed Tinasha, grinning fearlessly. Renart nodded.

Until now, all they had done was weather the attacks that came.

From here on, however, they would flip offense and defense. Tinasha had no intention of being lenient on scheming or anyone who approved of it.

Tinasha gave Renart several instructions, then started laying a trap of her own.

※

Five days before Tinasha began preparations for her counterattack in Tuldarr, a strange guest visited Farsas Castle.

Oscar attempted to turn them away at the door initially, but then he thought of something and admitted the visitor to the audience chamber. The king made no attempt to hide his amused expression. Before him stood Minister of the Interior Nessan, Chief Mage Kumu, Als—who had taken over the duties of the recently retired Ettard—as well as Doan the mage and Lazar. All of them stared suspiciously at this sudden arrival.

The woman swept into a graceful curtsy, a seductive smile on her lovely face. “I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Your Royal Majesty. My name is Delilah. Upon learning of the witch’s curse that afflicts you, I felt I simply must come. Please find a place for me at your side. I have the power to withstand the curse.”

Everyone except for Oscar reacted to that with looks of alarm and dismay.

Delilah fixed her chestnut-brown eyes on Oscar, appearing well aware of her charms—from her long, curly red hair to her voluptuous curves—and how to utilize them.

With a shallow grin, the king met her gaze. “How did you know that? That knowledge is supposed to be classified.”

“I come from a family of fortune-tellers. We are never wrong,” she replied.

“How fascinating. Then why have you chosen now to come?” Oscar questioned.

“Last month, my mother did a reading that told her I was to be the one to fulfill that role. In truth, I intended to come here sooner, but we are a family of travelers. It took some time to arrive here,” Delilah explained.

Oscar hummed noncommittally in response. He looked the woman up and down appraisingly. She bore his brazen gaze with a smile.

“Kumu, can you tell how much magic she has?” asked Oscar.

“I can see she has a considerable amount, but I can’t say whether it’s enough to stand up to the curse… I believe the princess of Tuldarr would know,” Kumu answered.

“That’s too bad. She’s busy right now,” Oscar muttered.

He hadn’t seen Tinasha in several days, which was enough to leave Oscar feeling that they hadn’t met in quite a long time. Mila occasionally came to check on him, but things in Tuldarr didn’t seem to be progressing. Tinasha was constantly tending to the comatose Legis.

Resting an elbow on the armrest and his chin on one hand, Oscar said to Delilah breezily, “Well, it’s your word. Even if you can’t bear the curse, I trust you’ll take responsibility for your claim. We’ll make up a room for you. Live there as you please.”

Oscar’s advisers’ jaws all dropped in shock when they heard his decision. Panicked, Lazar raised a hand. “W-wait just a moment. Princess Tinasha is…”

“Shut up and stay quiet,” Oscar commanded in a tone that brooked no refusal, and Lazar did just that. The king narrowed his eyes at his other advisers. “I have decided. There should be no objections, right?”

Ordinarily, their lord did not act this overbearing. While the group was baffled by his uncharacteristically unilateral decision, they bowed their heads in assent.

Flashing a confident smile, Delilah sank into a bow. As Doan took in her alluring figure, he thought with dread of what would happen when Tinasha returned. A chill ran up his spine. It was obvious that the beautiful princess was very attached to Oscar. He didn’t want to think about what it would be like when that attachment turned to jealousy.

Looking around, he saw that Als appeared to be feeling much the same. The advisers all exchanged glances and sighed to themselves.

※

Ordinarily, anyone without permission could not so much as stand in front of the door to the Tuldarr magical reference library that housed nearly every book and text on magic. It was one of the places in the palace that was off-limits.

Inside that repository, Chief Mage Lobros kept his inner anxiety from showing through. The guards stationed in the hallway had simply bowed and said nothing when he entered the room. Lobros was one of the few who only had to show their face to enter.

He surveyed the empty chamber and moved to the door at the back. Beyond that were the even more important texts…including the ones on forbidden curses.

Gingerly, he touched the chill surface of the closed entrance and gave his name. “I am Lobros, chief mage of Tuldarr, and I request passage.”

In response, the door slowly swung open. He swallowed nervously. Lobros had taken on the title of chief mage a little under a year ago, but this was the first time he had gone past this door.

Normally, no one was allowed into this room alone without permission, not even the chief mage, which is why Lobros’s face was tight with tension as he tiptoed in. He used magic to light up the dark room.

“…Okay.”

After checking to make sure the door had shut behind him, Lobros opened up a transportation array.

Several seconds later, a white hand reached in from the other side of it. He got ahold of it and pulled the person to him.

A petite young woman emerged from the half-closed portal. She surveyed the bookcases lining the room and snorted. “*This* is the reference library where they keep the information on forbidden curses?”

“It is. Do it fast. They’ll get suspicious if I’m in here too long,” Lobros warned.

“Then you have to help me, too,” she insisted accusatively. Lobros resented that tone but started to rifle through the shelves nonetheless.

Before long, they uncovered what they were after—the texts marked PENDING and placed next to the forbidden curse materials labeled FOR DISPOSAL and tightly sealed up. She picked up one of them.

Unmitigated glee oozed from her face. “This is it… How dare they hoard away such a sublime text all this time…”

“It’s meaningless, which is why I set it aside,” came a sudden voice as cold as ice.

Lobros and the woman frantically scanned the room. A man and a woman had appeared against one wall—Tinasha, the next queen, and Renart, a well-known, sharp, and able mage.

Tinasha flashed Lobros a smile. “Under normal circumstances, you would not be able to open up a portal from inside this room. I made some adjustments just for tonight. Did they come in handy for you?”

“P-Princess Tinasha… Whatever are you doing here?” he stammered.

“I won’t allow you to try to talk your way out of this. It would be a waste of time. Recognize the position you’re in.”

Her grin was overpowering, and Lobros fell to his knees with a groan. Renart stepped over to him and grabbed his arm. “Chief Mage Lobros, we will interrogate you in detail later about the attack on Prince Legis and about your infiltration of the reference library. Oh, and about the funds you embezzled.”

Renart slapped sealing ornaments on the other man. Having been thoroughly exposed, Lobros hung his head.

Tinasha, however, had already lost interest in him. She turned her attention to the young woman who had broken in.

The woman licked her lips lightly, then smiled despite her nerves. “How did you know? Did Lobros’s idiocy give it away?”

“No. The enchantment you put on Legis… After a lot of analysis, I’ve discovered that it possesses the same characteristics as that forbidden curse designed to be used against an entire city. Are you related to its author—or perhaps his disciple?” said Tinasha.

“My grandfather wrote this document. His whole life’s work and research was confiscated by the palace. In the end, he died of a broken heart!” the woman cried.

“Someone should have warned him while he was pouring his life into this…,” muttered Tinasha, dumbfounded.

Immediately, the woman screeched indignantly, “It would be so easy to destroy another country with that spell! My grandfather made that so we could fight back against Tayiri, where mages are persecuted! But you people sealed it up and persecuted *him*! He was the one thinking of Tuldarr above all else!”

After her tirade, she stamped her feet on the well-polished floor. The woman’s furious antics forced a cynical smile to appear on Renart’s face.

“I’m from Tayiri, but I’ve never wished that it be destroyed. And besides, if Tuldarr used a forbidden curse, our own political position would only worsen. I appreciate that he was thinking of the country, but surely you can admit his methods were warped?”

Tinasha grinned when she heard the concise argument. The woman seemed to falter for a moment but still refused to accept it. “I’ll use this to prove that it’s power that holds the real meaning here.”

“While I’d like to say you’re free to try…,” Tinasha began, straightening up from where she was leaning against a bookshelf. As the woman’s eyes darted around irritably, Tinasha stretched out a hand toward her. “We’re dealing with another matter entirely. The fact is that you attacked Legis. Now reveal your spell.”

“I refuse! Not for a prince who was trying to erase this magic!”

“It was set aside as pending, not for disposal, because it can do neither harm nor good.”

“Shut up!” the woman shrieked as an intangible shock wave struck the room. Bookshelves lurched dangerously. However, Tinasha, Renart, and even the cowering Lobros were protected by a barrier and thus unharmed.

Tinasha gave a little sigh and closed her eyes. Then, very slowly, she opened them again.

A bright light flickered in those abyssal orbs, powerful enough to subdue others. Her lips split in a smirk that revealed the strength of her magic. “I don’t really care if you refuse. I’ll simply break the curse normally, then. You’re an excellent curse maker, but I’d wager that means you’re not cut out for a one-on-one fight.”

“What are you…?”

“Since we’re all here, I’ll educate you on what it *truly* means to have strength,” Tinasha said. No sooner had she done so than an overwhelming blast of magic materialized.

The woman let out a voiceless scream as pure power descended on her.

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“Lobros tended to get carried away easily, so when he was drunk at a tavern in town, he let it slip about the embezzlement to a woman sitting nearby. She’s been blackmailing him to get information about the castle goings-on,” Renart reported.

Without turning to face him, Tinasha smiled grimly. “She had something on Lobros and was waiting the whole time for her opportunity to take back her grandfather’s forbidden curse texts. And then she heard that Legis wanted to organize some of those writings.”

“It’s obvious based on what happened with Druza that his main aim would be to destroy them, not just sort through them. In any case, she wanted to stop Prince Legis,” surmised Renart.

“She has good technique, but the way she went about it was sloppy. It makes all her prudence up until that point meaningless,” Tinasha remarked.

“It sounds like she didn’t factor Your Highness into her calculations. With the whole palace in chaos over the prince’s condition, she decided there wouldn’t be much in her way once Lobros slipped into the reference library. Well, all this really happened because word got out that the forbidden curse texts might be destroyed soon,” Renart concluded.

“You did excellent work. Thank you.”

“It was my honor,” Renart responded, and Tinasha smiled as she sensed that he had bowed his head.

Still facing the scrying bowl, Tinasha picked up a large bag of documents. Inside it were all the forbidden curse texts. “Nothing good will come of having these around. Ultimately, I don’t think we should keep the ones I set aside as pending, either.”

There was a touch of self-deprecation in her words. Then she set the bag ablaze in her hands.

As Renart watched, stunned, the flames burned only the bag and its contents away, until they shrank into nothing. With a wave of her hand, Tinasha caused the bits of ash that had fluttered to the floor to vanish.

“Ten days until the analysis is done. After that, I believe it’ll be another week until Legis is recovered. Which should be no problem at all. I’ll be with him during that time, so pass all his work to me,” Tinasha commanded.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“I’ll let Calste take care of the guilty parties. Compile a report on them, along with what happened to Legis. Oh, and there’s one thing I want you to look up.”

“What is it?” Renart inquired.

“Lobros insisted he wasn’t the one who leaked the information about destroying the curse texts; someone told him about it. It’s possible he was simply trying to talk his way out, but find out whether there was another person involved.”

Tinasha thought back to the attempted poisoning in Farsas. If there were other assailants yet to come, she couldn’t leave things be.

Renart bowed in acquiescence and exited. Tinasha let out a deep sigh.

It had taken longer than she would have preferred, but it seemed this matter was resolved. Had the woman who’d attacked Legis never learned of Lobros’s embezzling, she may have been able to live out her life in peace, even if she’d resented the Tuldarr government.

People meeting one another, and their fates intertwining, could be truly perilous at times. If Tinasha hadn’t met *him* when she was young, she may have lived an entirely different life. Things could have happened the way he told her they would—him begging for her to marry him four hundred years later.

“…No way.”

Just the thought of it made Tinasha giggle. Putting aside the Oscar of the past, the current Oscar only thought of her as a meddlesome cat. She was sure he wouldn't marry her even if she asked.

As though in response to that, her cheeks puffed up. Suddenly, she found herself wondering how Farsas was doing. Tinasha had been away for a while.

Oscar had a defensive barrier against magic placed on him. If he received any sort of magic attack, she would know right away. She hadn't sensed any changes, which must have been proof that all was well.

If Tinasha wanted to go, all she had to do was teleport over.

Yet she couldn't. She knew this was to be the distance between them once they were both rulers of their nations.

"It doesn't matter anyway. It's not like I want him."

As Tinasha whispered those words to herself, the beautiful shape of her lips twisted a little.

※

In the Farsas Castle lounge frequented by the mages, the aroma of tea always hung in the air.

Taking a break there with two of her colleagues, Sylvia wore an uncharacteristically sour face. "I *hate* her."

"Don't say that so openly. What if someone overhears?" Doan chided her, frowning as he looked over some documents.

It had been two weeks since Tinasha, princess of Tuldarr, had departed Farsas for her homeland and hadn't returned.

The woman Sylvia spoke of so resentfully was Delilah, who had virtually replaced Tinasha since her arrival.

"I mean, she's condescending, always looking down on us! Who does that woman think she is?!" cried Sylvia.

"The royal mistress," answered Doan.

In frustration, Sylvia raked her nails down the table, making a terrible screeching noise.

Kav looked up from his book. "But she has a lot of magic. She really might be a higher class of mage."

"Magic alone doesn't decide superiority among mages!" Sylvia protested, roughly thumping a fist.

The two men suppressed a sigh at Sylvia's fit. It was true that Delilah swanned about like she outclassed everyone else, flaunting the king's favor, but it didn't bother either of them because that was expected behavior from a royal favorite. Kav and Doan exchanged glances, as if to say that maybe Sylvia was only so upset because she was jealous.

"Oh, I wonder if Princess Tinasha will be coming back anytime soon…," moaned Sylvia.

"Stop saying such frightening things," Doan warned.

“Why?” Sylvia retorted.

Instead of answering, Doan gave an exaggerated shrug. The king had told him to be careful, because if Tinasha got angry, she’d destroy everything in her path. That said, the one most likely to be the source of that rage was the king himself.

That called into question why Oscar had invited Delilah in. None would deny she was a voluptuous creature, but the king wasn’t the sort to be swayed by that. What exactly had swayed his opinion?

Kav, who was unaware of the finer details surrounding everyone’s circumstances, spoke optimistically. “Personality aside, she’s a better match for the king than Princess Tinasha, don’t you think?”

“You’re being rather glib, too,” remarked Doan.

“What about her is a good match?! Do you really think a traveling fortune-teller is worthy of the king?” hissed Sylvia.

“I mean, there’s no way His Highness could wed the queen of another country,” reasoned Kav.

The conversation was jumping from one extreme to the other. Delilah had only wormed her way in because of the curse on the royal family, but Tinasha was in the process of breaking that spell. If nothing interrupted her progress, the king’s problem would be no more. Doing anything to jeopardize that would not bode well for ending the curse.

However, according to Oscar, he didn’t intend to mention Tinasha’s efforts to Delilah. At the moment, the king’s advisers had no idea what he was thinking and could only silently obey.

“Well, His Majesty’s still young. It’s not really something to get upset over,” Doan stated, sounding as if this conversation had grown vexing. Ending things there, he stood up.

※

At the same time, Lazar was in the Farsas study, handing documents to his king with an unhappy look on his face.

He said nothing, simply gazing at Oscar dispiritedly. The king ignored his friend at first but eventually couldn’t bear it and set down his pen. “Why are you acting so annoying? Stop looking like that.”

“Your Majesty… Unfortunately, I cannot approve of your keeping that woman near you. What are you thinking?” Lazar pleaded.

“Good question.”

Lazar, Oscar’s friend since childhood and royal attendant, knew that his king was not starved for choices of women to marry, let alone play with.

So why would he choose now to suddenly keep a woman like Delilah in his company? If this was about an heir, him waiting for Tinasha to break the curse was the best course of action. And if he wanted a mistress, Lazar thought selecting a more tight-lipped woman of obvious good lineage a prudent decision.

“Don’t tell me…you’re doing this to anger Princess Tinasha on purpose?” Lazar asked, horrified.

“If I were, what would I do after she destroys the castle? I’m not *that* much of an eccentric,” Oscar countered.

“Then, in that case, you don’t have very good taste. I feel sorry for Princess Tinasha, toiling away on your curse,” admitted Lazar.

“Do you want me to get together with her or separate myself from her? Pick one,” Oscar said flatly.

“I’m hoping for a middle path!” Lazar exclaimed.

The king set down his documents and leaned against the back of his chair. Sighing deeply, he crossed his legs. “For now, just leave it alone. She’s still busy curing Legis and won’t be back for a while.”

This morning, word had come that Tuldarr captured the culprits.

But in the end, those arrested had no connection to the man who tried to poison Tinasha in Farsas. At present, Tuldarr was investigating whether anyone else was involved but didn’t know if that would turn up any leads.

Still looking unhappy, Lazar set a cup of tea before his king. The taste was considerably different compared to the tea Tinasha made; Oscar sipped at it silently. When he noticed that his attendant was still looking at him reproachfully, Oscar broke into a sly smile. “Well, she *does* feel better in my arms than Tinasha, who’s way too bony.”

“You are the worst!” Lazar shouted, gathering up the documents Oscar had processed. As he headed for the door, he gave his candid opinion. “In any case, sort this out quickly! *Before* you send Princess Tinasha into a fit of rage!”

He slammed the door shut, and Oscar burst out laughing. Then he abruptly stopped and muttered, “It *would* be best if it gets sorted before she comes back.”

The king’s voice sounded terribly cold and regal.

※

Delilah crept along a deserted corridor deep within Farsas Castle, then stopped before the door to a room.

She was granted a fair number of privileges as the royal favorite, but several places were off-limits. This room, guarded by an airtight anti-trespassing barrier on the door, was one of them.

Delilah hovered an ivory-white hand just before the elaborate, delicate spell.

At her fingertips, a spell illuminated—

“What are you doing there?” came the sudden voice of a man.

Delilah pulled her hand back, turning around slowly and confidently.

There stood Als, the youngest general of Farsas. Delilah’s red lips broke into a smile, and she didn’t falter in the least. “Oh, I was just curious about what’s in this room…”

“That chamber is for our guest from Tuldarr, although she’s currently in her home country. No one can enter without her permission,” Als said.

“Is that right? I’m so very sorry,” Delilah apologized, and she turned to stroll away with fluid, graceful movements.

Suspicious, Als watched her go until she was out of sight.

※

With the criminals in custody, Tinasha worked on analyzing the enchantment on Legis while carrying out daily royal duties.

Though she did have Renart to help her, the speed and accuracy with which she carried out these tasks was extraordinary. Those who knew nothing of her origins and had derided Tinasha as “a girl whose only merit is her magic” were forced to reevaluate her.

In a council room with documents fanned out all around her, Tinasha made some tea and offered Renart a cup with a smile. “I did all kinds of work like this in the past, but the Traditionalists hated me and decided whatever I did was sloppy.”

“I suspect that, to them, it was less sloppy and more Reformist,” Renart replied calmly. He had gained Tinasha’s trust, and she had recently revealed her true origins to him. “It’s because you started to accept mages from Tayiri that my mother and I are alive today. Thank you.”

His nonchalant expression of gratitude brought a chagrined, embarrassed smile to Tinasha’s lips. Because Renart was born with magic, his mother fled Tayiri with him when he was very young and settled in Tuldarr. If he were still living in Tayiri, he would have been facing a lifetime of oppression.

Asked to take the throne in two eras now, Tinasha reflected back on her reign. “Four hundred years ago, the ruling family’s absolute power was considered very important, especially since the system was for the strongest to inherit the throne. But I don’t know what it’s like now. Druza has split apart; I don’t think we need to threaten other countries.”

“I think that’s what strength does. Showing off too much during peacetime will lead to unnecessary vigilance. However, we don’t know when something will happen,” Renart said.

“That’s true. But from a broad scope, it’s dangerous if a country’s power isn’t something that can be nurtured more extensively. Tuldarr’s mystical spirits and Akashia of Farsas are precarious absolutes that rely on the might of individuals and their bloodlines. We need to prioritize strength that’s stabilized throughout the populace instead of expecting a select few to have all the power… We’ve grown beyond the Dark Age, so I believe we can change the shape of the nation as well.”

What people referred to as the Dark Age was an era of devastating warfare that began over a thousand years ago and lasted for seven

centuries. Nearly all the major nations surviving to this day had been forged amid those conflicts.

Tuldarr's mystical spirits and Farsas's Akashia appeared during that period as well—cores each country gathered around. Yet nowadays, when both were established as Great Nations, such artifacts seemed useless to Tinasha.

There would still be skirmishes requiring Akashia, like the recent incident with Druza, but she expected that the future would be different now that nations had agreed to the treaty forbidding the use of extreme magical power in war.

In awe of how she always had her eyes set on the horizon, Renart bowed his head. "I am at your service for whatever you may require, my queen."

Tinasha winced at his proclamation.

Time periods were always alive with change as long as there were people to set that change in motion.

※

Delilah, dozing lightly on a bed in a dark room, felt a tapping on her ivory shoulder that drew her back to reality. She glanced up to see a man at the bedside staring down at her. "You can't sleep here. Go back to your room."

From her position on her back, she gazed up into his eyes, the color of the sky just after dusk. "How cold. It's already been two weeks."

"That doesn't matter. I can't rest with someone in the bed with me," he countered.

"Has that been the case with all your other girls?" Delilah asked.

"Mm, you could say that," Oscar answered. The only exception was the extraordinary mage from Tuldarr. She had fallen asleep on her own and appeared so defenseless that Oscar had regarded her as merely a cat in bed with him and let her stay. Although for a cat, she took up too much room and refused to get out of bed the next day, which were annoying qualities.

Delilah gave the young king a searching look.

If he was standing there, that meant he must have gotten out of bed while she was sleeping. For a moment, anxiety over what he may have been doing during that time flashed through her mind, but he wasn't wearing his sword, which for him meant he considered himself off duty. At the very least, Delilah had never seen him wear Akashia while they were spending time together. Surely, that was proof he wasn't on his guard.

Very slowly, Delilah sat up in bed. She pulled her gown on to cover her sweetly scented bare skin. Her red lips, visible even in the darkness, formed a smile. "Oh yes, the other day I got lost in the castle. I found a room I couldn't go into. General Als got very mad at me and said it belonged to someone from Tuldarr."

"Ah, Tinasha's room? That area doesn't belong to Farsas, even though it is part of the castle. There's all sorts of incomprehensible magic implements

in there, so of course no one can go in," Oscar replied dismissively, sitting down on the bed. Perhaps it was because he wasn't working, but he didn't seem to hold any interest in anything. Delilah had never seen him smile except for when they had met in the audience chamber. He didn't seem like the type to be indulgent with women. However, that was all conjecture on Delilah's part.

She cozied up to him, blinking her soft and purposely coquettish brown eyes up at him. "What kind of person is she? I'm very curious."

"It's nothing for you to worry about. She's going to become queen of a neighboring country. It's best to curry her favor, so I allow her in and out; that's all. You two wouldn't get along."

"Really?"

"You're so persistent. Turn your interest elsewhere. If there's anything you want, I'll give it to you," Oscar stated.

Delilah's eyes grew wide at his unprecedented offer. Then she flashed him a radiant smile.

Winding her soft arms around his neck, she pressed herself against him and whispered, "No, there's nothing. All I need is to be here with you."

"How admirable," Oscar praised in a calm, gentle tone.

Yet despite his words, the king only stared over the top of her head into the mirror, his gaze devoid of emotion.

※

A month had now passed since Tinasha stopped coming to Farsas Castle. Sylvia had about reached the limit of her patience, because all day long Delilah strutted about the castle, bossing around the soldiers and mages. She was beautiful and exuded sensuality, so the men weren't particularly bothered by it, but it did not go over well at all with the women. Delilah's mocking attitude toward them made it very difficult for Sylvia to keep her cool.

On one particular day, while Sylvia was fuming as per usual, Doan and Kav were determined to steer clear of the subject as they carried spell books through the castle hallways.

Outside the glassless windows, the weather was lovely. A blue sky studded with white clouds seemed to go on forever.

Distracted by the pleasant sight outside, Sylvia narrowly missed bumping into someone as she rounded a corner. At the last second, Doan yanked her back. She rushed to apologize and bow to the other person, but her face immediately stiffened when she saw who it was. Standing there was none other than the person she least wished to see, Delilah.

Delilah stared at all of them, especially Sylvia, before snorting. Winding one curly red strand of hair around her finger, she threw out her chest proudly. "I understand you must be very busy, but I would appreciate if you looked where you were going."

"…I'm so sorry."

"Don't you think the king would be terribly sad if something was to happen to me?" Delilah purred.

Sylvia very nearly said that he wouldn't. It was on the tip of her tongue, but she held it back and bowed her head. Doan and Kav exchanged discomfited glances.

Delilah continued to press her point with Sylvia, who still had her head bowed low. "You don't think very much of me, evidently. It's written all over your face. I'm shocked you can serve the court like that. Or do you perhaps have a male patron of some sort? I'm ever so jealous of the cute types."

"…"

Kav could virtually hear Sylvia's blood vessels popping. She snapped her head up, face flushed with anger.

As she was about to fire back some choice words, Doan and Kav dropped their books and rushed to pull Sylvia's arms behind her. Kav slapped a hand over her mouth. "Sylvia, don't. You know you shouldn't."

"If you have something to say, by all means let me hear it," Delilah needled.

Furious, Sylvia drove her elbow into Kav's belly. He doubled over in pain, while Sylvia straightened up and glared at Delilah. Shaking with rage, she opened her mouth to speak.

"I am—"

Before she could go on, however, a clear, bright voice came from behind them. "Doan, it's been so long. You too, Kav and Sylvia."

All three whirled around. Standing there at the window was one very rare mage, smiling. There was a mystical spirit accompanying her.

The skirt of the formfitting mage's robe Tinasha wore fluttered in the breeze. Her legs, visible from beneath it, were so slender they looked breakable. She turned a carefree smile on her friends. "Doan, did someone try to get into my room while I was away? There are signs of attempted tampering with the barrier… Ah, what's happening here?"

Tinasha broke off after noticing Kav on the ground, Sylvia with her mouth wide open, and Delilah standing beyond them. She cocked her head in confusion.

Doan felt a chill run down his spine. He had known Tinasha would return soon, but he never anticipated she would run into Delilah right away. It was inevitable that they would meet eventually, and he had prayed he would have nothing to do with it, if at all possible.

However, Doan summoned all his emotional strength and pasted a smile on his face as he picked up his books and walked over to her. "It's been a long time. I heard that things have been resolved in Tuldarr. Nothing about your barrier rings a bell, but I'll look into it. Actually, would you like to have some tea? Come on, let's go."

Doan spoke so rapidly Tinasha couldn't get a word in edgewise as he attempted to herd her far away.

However, Tinasha frowned, peering at Sylvia over Doan's shoulder. "What's wrong with Sylvia?"

"Princess Tinasha…," Sylvia muttered, all her energy gone now that the princess from Tuldarr had returned. Her eyes soon welled up with tears.

Shocked by her friend's emotional state, Tinasha rushed over to her. She was about to ask for more details when Delilah cut in. "I'm afraid I don't recognize you. Are you a mage?"

For a moment, Tinasha glanced over at Delilah suspiciously, but then she broke into a wan grin. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Tinasha of Tuldarr."

Delilah's eyes widened.

Both of them were beautiful, but their dispositions could not have been more dissimilar.

While Delilah was very clearly on her guard, Tinasha's inherent air of nobility remained unshakable. She did not have to answer to anyone, and her composure and coolness had been honed over the course of many years. She wore the face only one raised as royalty could possess.

Delilah crossed her arms and puffed out her ample chest, then addressed Tinasha in a pompous tone. "Well, well, well. So *you're* the princess of Tuldarr. Judging by the look of things, you appear to be quite close with this mage girl here. Perhaps you should choose your friends a little more carefully. Apparently, she's the sort to cozy up to anyone in a position of authority, not just men."

Her words were laced with barbs, and Sylvia's face turned bright red. She wasn't about to fight back in front of Tinasha, though.

Dumbfounded by Delilah's snide warning, Tinasha looked from her to Sylvia, who appeared to be on the verge of tears. Tinasha turned back to Delilah.

Her dark eyes narrowed. When she spoke, her voice was like ice. "I am at a loss to understand what you're trying to say. Who are you to tell me what you think without even introducing yourself? If you lack even the most basic of manners, no one will want to listen to your opinions. Assuming, of course, that they're not as misguided and laughable as what you just said."

Tinasha's scathing criticism came delivered in a soft tone. The impact was such that Delilah was unable to speak for a moment. Tinasha ignored her and looked to Doan. "Who is she?"

I didn't want you to ask me! Doan screamed internally.

Still, he answered reluctantly. "Her name is Delilah… She is the king's…"

"Oscar's what?"

"Why did you stop there?" came a man's voice from around the corner.

Doan wished fervently and honestly that he could run away from this place at top speed. Glancing over, he saw that Kav seemed to be entirely thrown by the worsening situation. Behind Tinasha, the color drained from Sylvia's face.

When the man rounded the corner, his eyes grew wide when he caught sight of the black-haired woman. “Tinasha, you’re back.”

“It’s been quite some time,” she replied, lifting a hand in greeting. She hadn’t seen the king of Farsas in a month.

He grinned at her, same as ever. “How’s Legis doing?”

“Fortunately, he’s recovered. Evidently, it was too unconventional for me to be doing his job, so I’ve been dismissed,” Tinasha responded.

“Too unconventional? You’re going to be queen,” Oscar pointed out.

“I intend to create a very different sort of country,” she replied matter-of-factly, and Oscar burst out laughing.

It was then that Delilah, who had been half forgotten, grabbed Oscar’s arm in a clear bid to garner his attention. Mila, who had merely watched this entire time, let out a low whistle when she saw that.

“Your Majesty, you were so right. I don’t think I’m going to get along with *her* at all,” Delilah cooed, gazing up at Oscar kittenishly.

Tinasha gaped at Delilah, then looked at Doan and Sylvia. Pale-faced, Doan nodded, while Sylvia shook her head, still on the verge of tears. Their diametrically opposing reactions gave Tinasha a vague sense of what was going on.

Unsure of how to react, Tinasha glanced back over at Delilah. “Well… If I were the type to get along with you, it might call my character into question. Thus, for my part, that’s fine with me.”

“Excuse me?! Your Majesty, say something to her!” Delilah cried.

“Don’t you say a word, Oscar,” Tinasha warned him, then turned to Delilah. “I don’t choose my friends based on how high status or powerful they may be. That has no bearing at all when it comes to my social life. Or perhaps you labor under the delusion that a powerful man by your side will elevate your own status? I don’t mind if you parade around on someone else’s authority, but I won’t remain silent should you insult my friend.”

Tinasha stood dauntless and firm as she criticized Delilah, whose gorgeous face twisted angrily. Unable to offer a retort, her lips quivered in rage.

Sensing she wouldn’t have to fend off a counterstatement, Tinasha broke out in a rare type of beguiling grin. With the eyes of a queen, she stared Delilah down. In the face of such a soul-binding smile, Delilah was struck breathless, forgetting even her outrage.

A shivery sort of allure held her captive. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from its irresistible gravitational pull.

Oscar sighed as he looked down at Delilah, pale and caught in Tinasha’s thrall. He used his free hand to wave at the black-haired mage. “Don’t overpower her. That’s my woman you’re talking to.”

“In that case, keep her caged up. Anything could happen when she wanders free with no collar and chain,” chided Tinasha.

“I’ll think about it,” Oscar said with a dry smile, then led Delilah away. Now back to her senses, Delilah tossed a triumphant smile at Tinasha as she passed. Tinasha kept calm, not gratifying the other woman with a reaction.

Once they were out of sight, Doan finally heaved a sigh of relief.

Still, he knew it wasn’t over the second he saw Delilah toss that smile over her shoulder. All the blood drained from his face.

“Who was that rude woman? I would very much appreciate if you could tell me all about her,” Tinasha stated imperiously, her tone brooking no refusal.

“Ah. I see. She’s the royal mistress.” Tinasha spoke in a voice as cold as ice, and Kav ducked his head instinctively.

They had all retired to the lounge, compelled by Tinasha to explain about Delilah. Floating in the air, Mila smirked in amusement. “What? So you got rejected *again*, Lady Tinasha?”

“Mila, I’m sure I don’t know what you mean. Do you think I have feelings for that irritating man?” Tinasha replied, all smiles as she glanced up at her spirit.

The smirk froze on Mila’s face. “Ah-ha-ha-ha… Never mind. Don’t get mad for real.”

“Oh, I’m not,” assured Tinasha.

A porcelain vase placed against the wall shattered with a high-pitched noise. Tinasha clicked her tongue at that development, then summoned a sealing earring into her hand and put it on.

The spirit girl quickly dodged in midair. “I-I’m going to go check on Legis!”

Mila disappeared, leaving the three mages behind.

Don’t rile her up and then just run away, Doan and Kav both thought.

They needed to pacify Tinasha before she blew up the castle. Doan, who understood best what was really going on, started by indirectly referring to the reason Delilah was welcomed into the castle. “I mean, His Majesty has *that* to contend with, doesn’t he? She said she can manage it.”

Doan had to word things awkwardly to skirt around classified subjects, but Tinasha managed to glean his meaning. She tilted her head to one side, her shapely eyebrows knit. “That’s…impossible, at her power level. She’d die.”

“What?! R-really?”

“Really. No ordinary level of magic can endure something like that. I’m a bit abnormal, so I could, but half my magic was something I acquired. No matter how great a mage you are, it’s impossible if all you’re armed with is the power you had at birth,” Tinasha confirmed.

Delilah had received special treatment this whole time because it was believed she could survive Oscar’s curse. It would be an entirely different story if that turned out to be a lie. Was she tricking the king knowing it would put her own life in danger, or had someone else deceived her?

Once he grasped the facts, Doan leaped to his feet. “I’ll go tell His Majesty.”

“Don’t you think he knows? It’s his excuse for so blatantly indulging her.”

“Princess Tinasha…”

With the way she was talking about Oscar and falsely accusing him, she either didn’t trust the king at all or was incredibly angry with him.

Doan propped his arms on the table to support himself as his body grew weak.

Smiling, at least outwardly, Tinasha went on. “Or is it some sort of roundabout concern for me? Implying I don’t need to work on breaking the curse anymore? I *am* having a hard time with it. How kind of him.”

“W-wait, please…”

Cracks appeared in five windowpanes, one after another. Sylvia watched it happen, shrinking away apprehensively. Tinasha summoned another sealing ornament and put the ring on her finger, but it did nothing to stem the tide of magic in the room.

Tinasha’s smile had remained unwavering, but now irritation flashed in her eyes for the first time. She gave up on grinning and pulled a sullen face. Carelessly, she raked her black hair back. “I don’t even know what to say… It’s all gotten so ridiculous. I’m leaving. I can’t look at his face.”

There was no doubting whom she was referring to. Tinasha took a moment to call up a spell, then vanished from the room.

In the lounge after the storm had gone, the three mages all exchanged glances, each of them wearing a different expression.

The castle city of Farsas was visible far in the distance to the south.

Tinasha had teleported away without using an incantation to a place high in the sky, where she hovered motionless looking down below her.

Here, where there was nothing but open, rolling plains, she could go unnoticed by anyone even if some of her magic leaked out.

She yanked off the sealing ornaments and dismissed them. As she did, a bolt of lightning flashed across the clear sky.

Observing her magic as it ran amok, Tinasha cursed him. “He’s really so…incorrigible…and annoying!”

Unable to hold them back, the words burst out of her, sounding even to her own ears like the cries of a child.

The heat running through Tinasha seemed to change color and erupt into flames. She used one hand to gather up the magic leaking out of her in bits and pieces. That vast power instantly formed a huge, sparking ball of light. Holding it in her hand, she eyed the castle in the distance.

If she wanted to destroy the structure, she could, even from here. Wiping it out would take only a moment.

She had the power to do so. Her lip curled.

“…So stupid,” Tinasha mumbled, feeling all the more overwhelmed now that she’d voiced her vexations.

Trying to wield her strength in childish anger only made her look foolish. So did the fact that she was the kind of person to lose her temper over something like this. Foolish—and pathetic.

Tinasha thought she already knew he had no interest in her. And she couldn't do anything about him going for another woman instead of waiting for her time-consuming curse breaking to be done. Letting a thing like that wound her was absolutely immature.

Despite understanding as much, it didn't change how mortified Tinasha felt.

"Oscar, I hate you!" she grumbled like a spoiled kid after extinguishing the ball of light in her hand.

The gripe wasn't meant for the present Oscar, but the one she had met many years ago. Back then, he often waxed poetic about his wife, the other Tinasha. He seemed to cherish her from the bottom of his heart. But what did that mean for her current self? The only way for her to interpret this was that she lacked the qualities to attract him.

"He promised he'd make me happy…" Tinasha bit her lip, tears streaming down her face. She knew it was misguided for her to lash out at Oscar's past self, but her heart ached so much when she remembered what he had said to her. In the end, she was nothing but a coddled little girl.

I didn't come here because I'm in love with him and want him. There's no way I'd desire someone like that.

Even so, Tinasha felt a little lonely, as if she were the only one out of place in this era. She had nowhere and no one's arms she could return to.

If the young woman could conquer this loneliness…would she become something else?

Tinasha shut her eyes, lost in childhood fantasies.

As her fertile imagination raced, a man suddenly spoke, snapping her from her reverie. "What do we have here? That's a good look on you."

His voice hummed in the air, and her eyes flew open in surprise.

Tinasha was high enough in the air that no one else should have been able to reach her. Yet there before her floated a man—a silver-haired, black-eyed, terribly beautiful fellow. There was an ethereal and inhuman quality to him, with a teasing smile plastered across his face.

"Travis…," Tinasha muttered.

The man snorted and looked askance at her. "I guess it's been four hundred years. Oh, but you were asleep, so perhaps it's like yesterday for you? Not like that's a significant amount of time for me, either."

"It has been a while… What are you doing here?" Tinasha asked.

"I came to get a load of your gloomy little face," he replied, his expression that of someone gleefully rubbing salt in someone else's wounds. Tinasha scowled.

Travis had conducted himself this way four centuries ago, as well. To the demon king, who was fond of humans and loved to meddle in their affairs,

Tinasha's suffering was nothing more than a delectable snack for him to feast on with some wine.

However, he was the one who suggested Tinasha go into stasis and chase after Oscar. She was grateful to him for that.

After some time smirking as he savored Tinasha's sullen face, Travis swept both arms out dramatically. "Whatever is the matter? You used a magic sleep to see him, but he won't look at you in the way you desire? You poor thing."

He truly had come to rub salt in her wounds, and Tinasha hung her head dejectedly. Feebly, she argued back. "No, it's fine. I wasn't expecting anything from him…"

"Don't try to act like it doesn't bother you. That only makes you look even more pitiable," Travis stated.

"Ugh…"

Perhaps he'd been watching all along, or maybe he had the power to learn about the situation now that he was on the scene. Travis laughed mockingly. "You need only kill that woman, right? You could turn her to charcoal in a flash."

"Humans can't do things like that…"

"Who else does things like that *but* humans? We certainly don't," Travis said, sniffing cynically. His assertion was oddly persuasive, and Tinasha struggled to respond.

It was truly outrageous. People had infinite reasons for killing one another.

However, Tinasha disliked the notion of murdering for her own lust. No matter how powerful the emotion was, she didn't want it to lead her astray. If that could happen, she'd rather have no feelings at all.

The young woman bit her lip as Travis eyed her appraisingly. "Do you not have your mystical spirits or whatever anymore?"

"I returned them when I abdicated the throne. I only have Mila left, though she's in Tuldarr now," Tinasha answered.

"Hmm," Travis responded disinterestedly. With a grand flourish, he offered a hand to Tinasha. It was fairer and prettier than most women's. When Tinasha looked at it, Travis smiled. "If you don't want to kill her, then you could always die, yes? Because it's too painful to live?"

"What?" Tinasha questioned, stunned. The man's words had been too blithe and abrupt, leaving her dumbfounded. Tinasha's body moved instinctively to weave a spell, however. Travis didn't joke about things like that. He did everything seriously, and it was all play to him. She had learned that firsthand.

Immense magic amassed at his fingertips, enough to change the whole atmosphere. Carelessly, he flung it at her.

"Ngh!"

The energy, powerful enough to eradicate anything, rushed violently at Tinasha. She let a defensive barrier take the hit.

Yet the spiral vortex of magic washed her away, barrier and all. She let it ferry her some distance back from Travis.

Shivers chilled her body. Her heartbeat thudded out of control.

Travis smirked, amused.

The second wave came from the right. If taken head-on, the attack would tear Tinasha apart; she eluded it by turning aside.

Travis mocked, “Come on, face me and take it. It’s no fun toying with a defenseless girl. Or are you just suicidal?”

“I still have a few things I need to do, so I don’t want to die…,” Tinasha stated, a spell coming to life in her palms. A mighty cruciform sword took shape in midair and slashed at Travis.

But with a light wave of his hand, he dissolved it. “Are you underestimating me? If you haven’t made any progress in four hundred years, then let me blast your guts open,” Travis hissed, his smile a lurid gash on his face.

Licking her lips nervously, Tinasha dashed through the air.

She recited a short incantation. The direction of the wind changed. Offsetting the formless power that assailed her on all sides and swallowing it up, she sent it back. The wild winds howled and grated harshly.

I never thought I’d end up having to fight him again.

Centuries ago, Tinasha had suffered a crushing defeat at Travis’s hands, and that was with all twelve of her spirits. Glancing down at her blood-drenched state then, Travis had decided that she was interesting, so he would let her owe him, and he healed her.

Now the time had come to settle that debt, and there was no way Tinasha would resign herself to death by his hands. She still hadn’t repaid Oscar for anything nor told him anything. She wanted to keep living.

For just a second, Tinasha closed her eyes.

The moment lasted an eternity. When she opened them again, she found herself on a battlefield.

“I will decide when I die,” the young woman declared, composing an impossibly intricate spell. Tightly interwoven white strands of magic swelled and multiplied, the spell terrifying in its sheer density.

If this power came from her very core, then it would stand as proof. Tinasha would rise above this. She would hold her head up high.

Trusting in herself, Tinasha let the energy fly.

※

When Delilah returned to her room, she burst out in an irrepressible smile.

Upon meeting Tinasha in person, she was certainly overwhelmed by her beauty and charisma, but Delilah was the one the king had defended in the end. He chose her over that pretty princess. That was absolutely good enough.

Delilah sat on her bed and set the vanity case she brought to the castle with her on her lap. She opened the box and inserted a thin nail file into the gap behind the mirror pasted to the underside of the lid. The gap widened, and a scrap of paper fell out. She unfolded it, spread it out, and saw that a magical sigil was drawn there.

Holding her hand over the mark, she murmured her incantation.

"Let my voice carry, tied to a single wing of old."

Once infused with her magic, the sigil glowed. A spell configuration rose to the surface of the paper.

After several seconds, an old man's voice spoke from above the mark. "Delilah? How are things going?"

"Perfectly. I've won the king's favor," she informed him smugly.

Her contact seemed to fall into thought for a short while. Seeking confirmation, he asked, "What's happening with the Tuldarr princess?"

"I met her, but she won't be a problem," Delilah replied.

"It doesn't look like the poison worked. Drive her away if possible. And if you can, destroy that spell she's in the middle of analyzing, too."

"I can't break into her room. If you really need that done, send some help," Delilah complained petulantly.

The man snorted. "Impossible. Fine, just drive her away, then. Do you think you can get into the treasure vault?"

"I think so, if I request it of him. He told me I can ask for whatever I want," Delilah bragged.

"Be careful. If you make it in, look for the box. It contains an orb inlaid with a tiny sigil."

"All right."

Delilah could control men as she pleased. However, this was her best one yet. She wanted to stay here forever if possible. His power and sweetness were melting her soul.

Still, she had to do what she was here for. Forgetting that spelled death no matter where Delilah fled. The old man was threat enough, but there was also *that other man*.

Abruptly, there came a knock at the door.

With a faint smile, Delilah quickly ended the call and folded the paper back up like it was. She slid it behind the mirror, shut the lid, and returned the box to its spot on her vanity table.

With an air of innocence, she called back, "Yes, what is it?"

"It's me," said her lover before entering. He stared right at her. "What were you doing?"

"Nothing at all, just thinking of you," Delilah lied.

Oscar gave a low laugh. Delilah frowned when she noticed Akashia belted at his waist.

"Are you heading out somewhere?"

"No. I'm not going anywhere," the king assured, unsheathing the sword. He leveled the tip of it at Delilah.

She was left stunned and frozen by this turn of events. Only his voice was gentle as he murmured, “You were very, very careful. I didn’t think it would take a month for you to slip up. Because of you, Tinasha’s upset. I might have to replace all the windowpanes again.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

“Did you not realize we’ve been watching you this whole time? Kumu’s been tracking your calls,” Oscar revealed.

Delilah instantly paled, clapping both hands over her open mouth. Excuses that might get her out of this ran circles through her mind.

I have to say something. I can’t back down here.

Mustering all her energy, she turned her soulful, pleading eyes on Oscar. She reached both hands out in supplication. “Your Majesty, they used me and threatened me. My feelings for you are real.”

“Whatever you’ve got to say, you can say it to Als,” Oscar declared, stepping aside. Now that he wasn’t blocking the door anymore, Delilah could see that Als and some soldiers were standing ready. The woman was aghast as she realized what that meant. “Arrest her. Put some sealing ornaments on her, too.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” replied Als, and he came in to grab Delilah by the arm.

As Oscar sheathed Akashia, Delilah shouted at him, “Wh-what do you think you’re doing to me?! You’re doomed without my help!”

“We’ll manage. Later, I’ll find out who put you up to this, but I’ve got someone who can break my curse. She’s even offered to bear my children if that doesn’t work out. A strange one, to be certain, but she’s a hell of a woman. That’s enough for me.”

Delilah’s eyes grew so round she couldn’t open them any further.

At the same time, Als inhaled sharply. Until now, he had never heard Oscar speak a positive word about Tinasha. This whole time, he was never able to work out whether Oscar really did think so little of her or if his insults disguised an attraction.

Still, knowing the truth changed nothing.

Oscar’s and Tinasha’s positions made it difficult for them to be together. If Oscar really did manage to make her his, it would be once breaking the curse had proved impossible. Aware of how complicated everything was, Als cast his eyes down.

The soldiers dragged Delilah out of the room as she made strange keening noises. Before they departed, Als turned back to bow good-bye to his king, only to find him gazing out the window with a faraway expression.

※

Tinasha ached all over. She had far too many injuries to count.

A short incantation stopped the bleeding on her leg. Without a moment’s delay, she teleported a few steps to the right.

Immediately after, a great black maw passed through where she had been moments earlier. The spray of magic kicked up stung her with lingering waves of pain. Tinasha traced a bloody finger through the air.

"I call upon the primeval waters, a torrent of life and death. Engulf everything and dominate what once was."

Upon the spell's completion, four thick pillars of water sprung up around her. They surged into a roaring whirlpool, though Travis remained unfazed. Tinasha pointed at him. "Go!"

The liquid columns rushed at the man from every direction at terrifying speed. All at once, he vanished amid the deluge.

As she made sure he wasn't reemerging, she began a new spell.

"Let my voice reverberate. I define it as a symbol of my wishes. May a breath of wind be deemed a blessing. For the manifestation of…"

"Don't use a double incantation right in front of my face," said a voice from right behind her.

In a panic, Tinasha cut the recitation short and ducked. She teleported a distance away.

"Ow!"

In a delayed reaction, searing pain lanced through her left arm. She looked down to see that a chunk of flesh was missing from the limb. Bone was visible. Though it hurt something fierce, Tinasha stanched only the bleeding and numbed the pain. Torn flesh would take time to restore, and she didn't have that luxury at the moment.

Travis loitered in the air, a bored look on his face. His left hand was dripping with wet crimson.

"You don't have any of your spirits, do you? Don't leave yourself wide open like that," he drawled.

"Yes, but…"

As Mila had pointed out once before, Tinasha had only ever fought in the rear guard. Aside from doubling her incantations, she didn't know what else to do.

Regardless, she was up against the virtually all-powerful demon king. His magic was in an entirely different league, not to mention his combat skills. Forget about winning—Tinasha couldn't even survive a head-on challenge like this.

I need to think…

Controlling her breathing, Tinasha sought after an idea.

Even as she did, countless blades of wind bore down upon her from all sides. The relentless, inescapable hail of attacks continued to buffet the young woman.

There wasn't the smallest pause in the onslaught.

Taking a sharp inhale, Tinasha deftly weaved through the storm, each strike missing her by a hairbreadth.

I should be able…to make it even more precise and well honed…

She focused her mind. Her thoughts cleared.

Tinasha got ahold of all the paths of her magic. She sensed them quite distinctly, whether they were behind her or above her.

All her years of experience started to catch up to the future, always one moment ahead.

"…Sing."

A spell exploded out.

It was made up of infinite lines of magic woven together, beautifully intertwined as it expanded. Though each and every strand was so fine it was almost invisible, the spell still deflected all the wind blades. Tinasha was utilizing the minimum amount of power to defend against a storm of attacks.

Travis whistled. "Did you finally get serious? Your moves are better than they were last time."

Not only that—they were superior to what they'd been several minutes ago. Tinasha was transforming into someone who existed purely to fight, not in the vanguard or in the rear.

Travis eyed the woman with amusement before muttering, "But you've still got a ways to go."

Then he launched an invisible net toward her.

She noticed it and leaped out of the way, but it pursued her as if possessed by a will of its own.

"…Ngh!"

Beams of light erupted from Tinasha, tearing the net apart. Unfortunately, it stitched itself back together in an instant and resumed pursuit.

It caught her foot, slicing right through the skin and getting ahold of her bone.

"AAAAAAHHHH!"

Burning pain wrecked her concentration. Tinasha panicked. The net kept twining around her body; she writhed as terrible agony devoured her.

Travis jeered, "What, over so soon? How dull. My loss for getting my hopes up. Should I make your little crush pay for the rest?"

With pain bleaching her mind, Tinasha only barely managed to hear Travis.

Anything was preferable to that.

"Ah…"

Energy emanated out from all over her body, powerful magic without a spell. It burned up the net, which vanished.

Wounded all over, Tinasha glared at Travis, her abyssal eyes glinting murderously. "I won't let you get anywhere near him."

"…That's a good expression. I can't say I don't enjoy it. But you'll die with all that blood rushing to your head, you know," he taunted.

"I will rip you apart!" Tinasha cried, cloaking her right arm in magic and leaping at him.

The power around her hand turned into a giant black sickle, which she used to slash at him.

However, Travis evaded the scythe hurtling toward him by dodging neatly to the side.

The sickle scattered into pieces.

Launching herself higher and teleporting away, Tinasha began an incantation.

The sight of her racing through the sky on her bloodied limbs was abnormally beautiful.

※

Kumu, who had been tracking Delilah's communications, soon identified a building in the city as her partner's location. Oscar flashed a derisive smile when he heard that report. "So it was that shady cult, huh? Got it. Head straight there and arrest the whole lot of them. Don't let a single one escape."

Meredina bowed upon receiving that order and left the room. Kumu watched her go, then frowned. "Your Majesty… I can sense powerful waves of magic coming from the north."

"How far north?" questioned Oscar.

"About halfway between the capital and the village of Tennett… It's…as intense as a forbidden curse," Kumu answered.

"What did you say?"

The cult situation shouldn't have involved anyone capable of something like that. Oscar fell into grim contemplation.

"…Where is Tinasha?" he asked after a pause.

"I do not know…," admitted Kumu.

"I'm going to go take a look. Can you handle the rest?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," said Kumu, and Oscar dashed from the room. He checked to make sure Akashia was belted on.

Perhaps she was in the lounge with the other three mages from earlier. He ran headlong down the corridor, praying she was there.

※

"Let my breath be the definition! My words shall form life!"

As Tinasha verbalized the spell, hundreds of vines appeared from within her arms.

Each one was as sharp as a pike and lanced straight for Travis, who snapped his fingers and cast a barrier. The vines stuck against the shield one after another, then stopped. Once every vine was caught, Travis smashed it apart, barrier and all.

"Your attacks have been getting sloppy," he commented.

Tinasha didn’t answer. She teleported to a new location and began a different spell.

The demon king eyed her coldly. “So this is all you have…”

The instability of the human psyche was at times intriguing and, at others, irritating to him. It was fascinating how people could call upon strength beyond their limits for the sake of another, but they inevitably grew too hotheaded to heed warnings. It was rapidly driving down Travis’s interest in his opponent.

Tinasha’s waves of destruction surged before him. However, he canceled them out with a light wave of his hand. “I’m so bored. Soon I’ll be totally disillusioned with you.”

A massive spell took shape within his hands, brimming with more than enough power to wipe out a single person.

Yet in the distance, he saw Tinasha—who should have been resigned to her defeat—smiling bitterly.

She stretched out a bloodied hand to Travis.

“…Culminate.”

With that word as the final thing wrung from her, a gigantic cage materialized in midair.

It was crafted of a colossal, finely woven spell. As it locked Travis up, it glimmered brighter and brighter by the second.

Shocked, the demon king stared at the magic enveloping him. “You little… A double incantation?”

“I bet you didn’t think I’d try one after you said all that. I used your argument against you. I divided it into seven charms and doubled them, creating one spell configuration,” Tinasha explained while panting.

Travis laughed out loud, highly amused, even as white radiance pressed down on him. “So that fit of rage was all an act? You’ve gotten quite a personality over the years.”

“I couldn’t win unless I tricked you,” Tinasha admitted, lifting her hand up and intensifying the spell. The luminous cage turned into a gigantic sphere, a formidable feat of magic that outdid even the forbidden curse that decimated Ynureid.

Even as Tinasha spoke to Travis, her hands continued to work at her spell. “I owe you a debt. I don’t want to kill you.”

The demon king had nearly destroyed her, but she was only here now because of him. Tinasha hoped this could end with a draw.

Unfortunately, Travis didn’t reply, no matter how long she waited. She vacillated over what to do.

There was little time to keep waiting. Tinasha came to a decision and mobilized the last of the magic needed to complete the spell.

The force of her will traveled through the air.

Then there was a sharp *pop*, like something rupturing.

“What…?” she muttered wonderingly. The spell wasn’t complete. The magic carrying her will had gotten shot down in midair.

Tinasha looked down at herself. Her lithe form was battered all over, and there was a hole the size of a child's head through her abdomen.

The moment felt interminably long. Eviscerated organs and severed flesh fell to the earth with a spray of blood. Tinasha tried to cry out, but her mouth filled with blood.

The light sphere encasing Travis lost its spell caster's magic and disappeared. Wide-eyed as she beheld Travis floating there, Tinasha knew she had lost.

She slumped over. The magic that was supporting her dissipated.

I don't want to die yet…

Tinasha reached out, grasping after someone.

But then she dropped slowly to the ground like a broken doll.

Travis smiled as he watched her plummet. "You're on the right track, but you're just not good enough. You're still just a tiger cub—can't even wield your own magic well."

He stretched lightly, then thought for a moment.

A devious smirk on his lips, he teleported away to pursue the thought that had struck him.

※

After rushing to the lounge, Oscar was aghast to learn Tinasha wasn't there. "She's not? Why? Did she go back to Tuldarr?"

"All she said was that she was heading out for a bit…," Doan said evasively, which probably meant Tinasha had left in resentment over what transpired with Delilah. But he didn't think she'd go back to Tuldarr over that. She'd want to be alone until she calmed down.

"…Don't tell me she went to the northern plains?" Oscar guessed.

Then the air behind him warped. The red-haired spirit girl tumbled in. Once she saw Oscar, she shouted, "Save her! Lady Tinasha is going to be killed!"

"What?" Oscar responded, startled. She was the Witch Killer Queen; who could kill her?

With that thought in the back of his mind, Oscar immediately held out a hand to Mila. "Take me to her!"

The spirit took his hand. His vision swerved, and his surroundings changed.

They teleported to a deserted prairie, one Oscar recognized as the place he had guessed. From his position in the middle of the vast moor, he saw a woman collapsed on the ground…and a man kneeling next to her, who turned around upon sensing their arrival.

Oscar didn't know the man, who had a face as stunning as a work of art.

However, it wasn't the man who shocked the young king. It was the unconscious woman covered in blood lying at the stranger's feet. Her white dress was cruelly torn in many places, and there was not a trace of her

sweet beauty. She appeared like one would be after having been crushed underfoot. Oscar couldn't make sense of this, but he set off at a run before he knew what was happening. Unsheathing Akashia, he raced over.

Travis's lips quirked up in a shallow grin. "The husband is here already."

Ignoring whatever that meant, Oscar loosed a horizontal slash with Akashia. The blade moved too fast to be seen and should have decapitated the man, but it only caught through empty air.

Travis teleported a dozen paces behind and shook his head. "You shouldn't wave that thing around, it's dangerous."

"What did you do to her?" demanded Oscar, his voice infused with bloodcurdling authority.

An ordinary person's knees would have buckled under the force of it, but Travis replied coolly, "Oh, nothing much. I just toyed with her. No big deal, right?"

He spoke of it like they had only played a children's game, yet there was unmistakable malice bleeding into his tone. Oscar's blood boiled to hear the way he spoke. Keeping his eyes fixed on the stranger, he said to Mila behind him, "Heal Tinasha. If it looks like she can be moved, get her out of here."

"A-all right," Mila agreed.

The way the man spoke, it sounded as though Tinasha still lived. Mila flew to her master's side, and Oscar stepped in front of both to guard them.

Red-hot rage tinged the edges of his vision. His innards burning with fury, Oscar adjusted his grip on Akashia. "Don't think you're walking away alive, you inhuman thing."

"Oh? You can tell I'm not human? Not bad. Very interesting," the stranger replied.

"Enough joking around," Oscar snapped. He exhaled briefly, held his breath, and then raced forward like lightning. As Akashia swooped down on him, the man irritably clicked his tongue. He raised a glowing white hand—but an invisible defensive barrier repelled the rays from it just before they could make contact with Oscar's arm.

The stranger's beautiful face twisted in astonishment as the blade loomed closer. "*Her* barrier? Really?"

Akashia threatened to cut him in two while he complained.

Just before it could, however, the stranger teleported away again. Standing in midair out of the sword's reach, he stared down coldly at Oscar. "Don't get carried away and do *not* underestimate me. I'll burn you up until there's not a cinder left," he spat, the words foretelling death and his tone enough to make a weaker man faint.

Undaunted, Oscar stared up at his opponent. Just as he was about to drop some choice words of his own, Tinasha's hoarse voice floated over to him. "…I won't let you kill him."

"Tinasha!" Oscar cried, turning back to see her sitting up with Mila's support, her face sickly pale. She glared at Travis with dark eyes filled with

heroic determination. “I won’t let you lay a finger on him…no matter what I have to give in return.”

Powerful magic pooled in her bloodstained frame. It was enough might to swallow the entire grassland and completely decimate it.

Her gaze made it apparent she was prepared to trade her life for this. Travis let out a dry laugh when he caught sight of the blazing orbs. “How stupid are you? All this for someone who won’t even look at you? Ridiculous…”

His retort sounded more pitying than scornful.

Still, the look in Tinasha’s eyes didn’t change. Travis glanced at her, then at Oscar, still emanating bloodlust. Exasperation crossed his pretty face…and then, suddenly, he shrugged. “I’m tired. I’ll play with you another time.”

That was all he stated before vanishing. Oscar’s eyebrows shot up at his foe’s abrupt departure. “Who the hell is that guy? What even is he?”

“He’s the highest-ranking demon… I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d killed us all,” Tinasha admitted weakly. Oscar sheathed Akashia and flew to her side. Her visage was still ghastly, and she was still drenched in blood. Curiously, Oscar didn’t find any injuries on her skin.

Turning to Mila, he asked, “Did you heal her wounds?”

“It was more like…they were all closed up by the time I got to her,” the spirit replied.

“Travis must have mended them. He’s good at that sort of thing… I couldn’t have healed the hole in my stomach up this perfectly,” said Tinasha.

“The hole in your stomach?” repeated Oscar, the unsettling remark making him go check and see that, sure enough, there was virtually no fabric between her chest and her lower abdomen. While Tinasha’s body seemed fine, the damage to her garments suggested something had torn clean through her midsection. Her slender legs were completely bare as well, and she was smeared nearly all over in blood and mud. The scene gave the impression that she had been cruelly violated, and an indescribable resentment filled Oscar.

“…Does that man know you’re a spirit sorcerer?” asked Oscar.

“What? I think he knows,” she responded, and Oscar felt like he’d swallowed something bitter. He had only faced off against that man for a few moments, but he seemed the type to harass those he took an interest in. If he knew Tinasha was a spirit sorcerer, he might attempt to purposely diminish her magic.

Should Tinasha lose her chastity, it could have dire ramifications for her coronation. He took off his jacket and covered her thin body with it. As he picked her up, he caught a strong whiff of blood.

“For now, let’s go back to the castle. Can we go directly into your room?” he inquired.

No one else could see Tinasha in this state. Mila opened a transportation array, and Oscar stepped into it with Tinasha in his arms. As he carried her, she looked up at him suspiciously. “Oscar… You’ll get blood on your clothes…”

“So what? Anyway, I’ll marry you if what just happened has ruined your ability to become queen.”

“What?! Wh-why?!”

“I’ll negotiate with Tuldarr. We might get into a dispute over it, but you won’t need to leave.”

Tinasha’s room in Farsas was dim, with cloths draped over the windows because it had been vacant for over a month. While that was a coincidence, it proved very convenient. Oscar brought the wounded woman over to the bed and sat her down there, while Mila dashed into the bathroom. Tinasha was the only one who seemed to be unawares, and she protested, “What? Why would you need to do that? I’m the one who lost, so why would you get involved?”

“I wasn’t careful and let you go off alone. If you’ve lost your chastity, I’m prepared to take responsibility,” he explained.

“But I haven’t lost it! Stop saying such frightening things!” Tinasha shrieked at the top of her lungs, then she swayed woozily from the blood loss.

Oscar wrapped a supportive arm around her shoulders. “Really? You don’t have to lie to me.”

“Yes, really… All I lost were my organs. It appears he’s made me new ones.”

“It’s true!” called Mila from the bath.

Oscar breathed an instinctive sigh of relief, and Tinasha turned an indignant gaze on him. “Anyway, you have that mistress, so stop spouting nonsense like that.”

“Mistress? Oh, you mean that woman,” Oscar said. He’d already completely forgotten about Delilah.

His reaction made Tinasha frown and turn aside huffily. “I’ll thank you for what you did and report later about what happened, so why don’t you run on back to her? I don’t want to deal with any more of her tasteless comments.”

“…Lady Tinasha, the bath is ready. Let’s wash off this blood. It has his magic in it, so it’ll turn to poison if we don’t cleanse it fast,” called Mila.

“Th-that wouldn’t be good… I’m coming,” Tinasha replied, attempting to stand. Unfortunately, her legs had no strength, and she nearly fell flat on her face.

Oscar caught her and lifted her up in his arms. “You’re a mess. How could I leave you here?”

“I can do it myself!”

“As for that woman, she’s been arrested. She was never a royal mistress or anything like that.”

“What?” Tinasha balked, eyes wide. Oscar carried her into the bath and set her down inside the tub, filled with the hot water Mila drew.

The spirit girl flung several white cloths at Oscar and said blithely, “Lady Tinasha, you’ve lost so much magic and blood that you can’t move very well, can you? Let him undress you. Fast.”

“I’m not a child, and I can undress on my own…,” Tinasha insisted petulantly.

“Aren’t both of you forgetting something?” Oscar asked.

The inhuman spirit didn’t think anything of a man touching her master, and Tinasha was sulking over the idea of anyone treating her like a kid. However, she really couldn’t move—she screamed when she tried to lift an arm.

Oscar passed Tinasha a cloth. “Cover up your front. I’ll be quick in rinsing all this off.”

“I—I hurt all over… The backlash from getting my organs restored is awful…,” Tinasha muttered dispiritedly as Oscar reached around to remove her dress, which barely resembled an article of clothing anymore.

The sight of her skin stained with blood everywhere was awful. Oscar ladled up some water and poured it across Tinasha’s back. Soon the thick smell of blood permeated the room.

He scrubbed at caked-on bits and started checking to make sure there were no wounds underneath. “Does it hurt anywhere? If you have any open cuts left, close them up before the water stings them.”

“I—I told you I can do it myself! And anyway, what’s this about her getting arrested? Did you two have a lovers’ spat?”

“Of course not. This whole time, I was just letting her run free to see what she did. It was already fishy that she knew about my curse,” Oscar explained as he moved Tinasha’s hair out of the way to pour water over her bloodied nape and arms.

Her jaw dropped. “Did you play along because you were suspicious?” she pressed.

“That’s a roundabout way of putting it, but yes. It was probably the same group that plotted your poisoning. Sadly, I caught everyone except the actual perpetrator, just like the first time.”

“Urgh,” Tinasha groaned, pursing her lips as she recalled how she got into it with Delilah not knowing any of that. “In that case, you should have told me sooner… If I’d known, I would have…”

“Not broken any windows?”

“I didn’t break any this time!” she shouted. It was the castle itself Tinasha had nearly blown up, but she had stopped herself. No, all the young woman did was cry about it. When she remembered how she had sobbed like a child, she buried her face in the cloth she was holding. “I-I’m so embarrassed… I want to just disappear…”

“What’s gotten into you now? Also, you’re definitely feeling shame for the wrong thing,” Oscar muttered, throwing water all over the naked form she had so defenselessly revealed to him. Tinasha fussed and wriggled at the sensation. Oscar splashed her with such force that she shrieked slightly.

“Anyway, what happened with that demon person? Explain *that*,” Oscar said.

“Oh…,” Tinasha replied, an awkward look crossing her face as she reluctantly told him about the capricious demon king.

Oscar listened silently but pinched her cheeks when he learned that this made the second time she was defeated and brought to the verge of death.

“Ouch! What was that for?” she yelped.

“Don’t associate with him anymore!”

“He’s the one who came to me! I don’t know why!” she shouted. That much was likely true. Oscar only had sparred with Travis for a short while, but he could tell this demon king was a slippery one.

“You really are a huge pain to look after. A damn handful and then some…,” he whispered. He’d left Tinasha alone for one moment, and she’d almost died. She got herself into so much trouble that he couldn’t take his eyes off her. It made no sense.

Her back was at last clean and white again, and Oscar softly rubbed the faint traces of lacerations on the smooth skin there. His fingers were rough, and Tinasha jolted, then glared reproachfully at him over her shoulder. “You don’t need to… You can leave me alone. Besides, even if I really had lost my chastity, that wouldn’t be any reason for me to become your wife.”

“…”

The temperature in the warm bathroom dropped a few degrees. “Oops,” Mila murmured as she drew more water.

But Tinasha hadn’t noticed, scrubbing the blood off her knees as Mila rinsed them off.

In a chilly tone, Oscar said, “There wouldn’t be any reason? Then what would suffice, dummy?”

“I-I suppose if my country were on the verge of destruction, then… maybe…”

“Oh? So you want your country destroyed. You’ve got some nerve.”

“I never said that, did I?! What’s with you? Honestly!” Tinasha shrieked.

Oscar pulled her hair back tight in a ponytail, causing her to let out a very feline cry of “Mrrk!”

“In any case, if that man ever comes around again, you get out of there right away. And call for me sooner! I told you I’d come and save you!”

Reflexively, Tinasha ducked her head. A moment later, she jerked her sulky face to the side again. “Thank you very much for your concern. But I’ll settle my affairs myself. You rescued me this time, but you could have messed up and gotten yourself killed, too. Ultimately, you and I have nothing to do with each other…so please leave me alone.”

This was her attempt to push Oscar away and draw a line between them, though it sounded like a small child pretending to be tough.

She bit her lip. Her downcast eyes blurred with tears.

Oscar didn't respond. Nervously, Tinasha looked up at him—and froze. Anger was clearly visible in his gaze, but it wasn't the usual cold sort. Blazing emotions raged in his eyes. She almost apologized instinctively but stubbornly held it in.

After glaring at her for a short while, Oscar suddenly broke eye contact and spat out, "If that's how you feel, then do what you want."

He turned his back on her and left the bath.

In the quiet tub, Tinasha heaved a deep sigh.

Once again, she looked down at her stomach. It was thanks to Oscar and Mila's rigorous scrubbing that her body was clean and pale again.

Mila laughed as she replaced the water in the bathtub. "Lady Tinasha, why did you have to go and say that?"

"Say what?"

"If he says he's going to save you, why not just go along with it and let him? And if you want to marry him, he's already stated his willingness to negotiate with Tuldarr."

"But…he'd only end up at a disadvantage in that case. We can't."

If not for Tinasha, there would be no reason for Oscar to battle a demon king or marry someone he didn't even like. She had no intentions of placing such a burden on him. She had come to save him, not add more stress.

Tears stung her eyes as she hugged both knees tight to her chest. Mila grimaced to see her master with such a hangdog look. "In that case, I think you should just tell him that. Aren't you already familiar with how bad it feels to have your offer of help rejected?"

"……"

"Besides, it's not like he gave his aid halfheartedly. That Akashia swordsman… Earlier, he told me to take you and run. Normally, he wouldn't provoke someone who beat you up. He could have died," Mila said.

"What?" Tinasha exclaimed, her eyes growing wide with shock.

Mila handed her a new cloth. "I don't understand either of you humans. You can only live for such a short period of time, and yet you get in your own way."

"Get in my own way…," Tinasha murmured.

Ultimately, she didn't know how she should act around Oscar. While he'd said he wanted to save her, she didn't feel confident enough to presume upon that kindness.

Tinasha had reminded herself many times that his kindness didn't mean anything more. No longer was she a child blessed with unconditional love. She didn't want to rely on anyone and grow weak. If she had to let go of his hand someday, she was apprehensive of the very act of taking it in the first place.

Tinasha closed her eyes, then recalled what *he* had said to her so long ago. *"You can do it."* She'd believed in those words and had gained confidence in herself.

"I'm still all right. I can be strong."

Slowly, she exhaled, her mind returning to order.

Tinasha had done that thousands of times when she was queen.

She needed to stand on her own. If she couldn't, then she was unfit to rule. That had ever been the case.

Suddenly, however, the emotions she had so precisely controlled dripped out like water. "But that night, I wasn't by myself…"

When things were the hardest they had ever been, *he* was right there with her. She was not alone in the slightest.

Tinasha's throat grew tight. She buried her face in her knees, and a strong wave of drowsiness swept over her—recoil from her serious injuries finally catching up.

All she wished to do now was let go and sleep. Thinking about this was overwhelming.

She didn't want to be alone in her dreams, though…

Wet eyelashes fluttered softly.

※

By the end of the day, all the upper-echelon members of the cult that sent Delilah into the castle were arrested. Relieved, their neighbors gossiped avidly about what that shady-looking bunch could have done to get hauled off to the castle.

After Kumu and Als brought him that report posthaste, Oscar did nothing to hide his irritation at what the investigation uncovered. "So in the end, the mage who gave Claris the poison wasn't among those apprehended?"

"According to Delilah, she also received orders directly from the same man."

Upon organizing the findings, the cult's objectives were revealed to be twofold.

The first was to obtain a mysterious orb said to be inside the Farsas treasure vault.

The second was to kill Tinasha or have her removed from Farsas.

Oscar puzzled over how those two objectives could be related. "Should I go take a look at this mysterious orb or whatever it is? Seems like the sort of thing one shouldn't touch."

"I'm not sure… Security is tight around the treasure vault. It's been that way since the break-in forty years ago," answered Als.

"Forty years ago, huh? A thief got away without stealing anything?" asked Oscar.

"What was stolen was never determined," Als clarified.

“Sounds like it’s high time to put things down there in order, then,” decided Oscar, scribbling his signature on a document and handing it to Kumu.

Als continued with his report. “Delilah and Claris’s contact and the cult founder’s opinions clashed a little in regards to Princess Tinasha, it seems. The cult wanted her dead or to destroy her curse-breaking spell, while the man only wanted her kept away from Farsas. Many people heard him say she couldn’t be killed anyway.”

“This part of it makes even less sense. What does it matter whether she’s in Farsas?” Oscar remarked.

“Maybe it’s because they were backing Delilah, but Tinasha’s presence would have thrown a wrench in that,” Als suggested.

“I thought so, which is why I made sure to show Delilah so much favor. Well, Tinasha did tear her to shreds, so I guess she got in the way regardless,” Oscar remarked breezily.

Als felt deeply relieved he hadn’t been present for that.

Resting his chin on his hands, Oscar’s eyes narrowed. “Considering all the time it took, the one man we were looking for escaped, huh? It’s very aggravating how we always seem a step behind.”

“I’ll increase security for people in the castle,” Als promised.

After Kumu and Als left the study, Oscar rubbed his shoulders. “…I’m still so on edge.”

His unsettled mood from the day before hadn’t quieted at all. He suspected that was partly due to a certain disobedient woman.

The mere recollection of her stubbornness upset him. He wished she would lean on him at least a little during her stay here. Both of them were guilty of trying to do everything on their own, but he wanted her to concede a little ground if that pigheadedness meant her nearly dying.

Lazar, on the other hand, hadn’t said a word about the restless mood Oscar had been emanating all day.

He wanted to ask if Oscar had managed to reconcile with Tinasha, but he had a feeling if he did, the king would only vent his anger at him. Lazar realized that while his lord was often annoyed with her, the two of them were still slowly growing closer. This only made Lazar, who was well aware of both of their positions, more anxious.

Still, if he asked Oscar about it, he was likely to hear *I don’t feel anything for her*, in response.

For now, Lazar prayed that was true. If Oscar fell for her completely but had to let go of her in the end, that would end up causing him the most pain.

Suppressing his emotions as he picked up a sheaf of documents, Lazar looked up at the sound of a knock on the study door.

Standing on the other side was the beautiful mage at the center of this whole thing. Her long black hair was tied up in two ponytails, and she appeared fidgety and embarrassed.

Oscar was clearly displeased as he said, “What is it? Come in.”

“Okay…,” Tinasha answered, shutting the door behind her and walking over to stand in front of his desk. As she hesitated, she stared right at Oscar. Sensing her gaze, he looked over with his head resting on one hand.

Nervously, the young woman began. “I’m incredibly sorry about yesterday. I shouldn’t have gotten upset with you after you saved me.”

“It’s fine,” Oscar stated curtly, swallowing what he really wanted to say, which was *It doesn’t have anything to do with me anyway, right?*

Voicing that thought would only lead the pair into another childish dispute. At the very least, Oscar wished to maintain some decorum, whether she did or not.

Tinasha went on haltingly. “Also… I have a favor to ask.”

“Ask away.”

Her dark eyes wavered, gleaming with an alluring light. Oscar narrowed his eyes against it.

Determinedly, she went on. “Um, whenever you’re free is fine, but… would you teach me swordplay?”

Her request was so unexpected that Lazar almost dropped his pile of documents.

As for Oscar, his chin slipped from his hand.

Tinasha flushed as she observed their reactions. “U-um…did I say something weird?”

“No…,” Oscar replied, scratching his head as he gestured at her to come closer. She did, circling the desk until she was standing next to him.

Still seated, Oscar turned to face her. After trying to decide how best to respond, he smiled wryly. “All right. I’m also going to get out of shape doing nothing but paperwork all the time, so it’s perfect. I should be done in another hour, so go prepare and wait for me.”

“Thank you!” Tinasha cried, breaking into a broad smile now that he’d agreed. It looked like flowers blooming across her face. She rushed out of the room, making no effort to hide her childlike happiness.

As he watched her go, he muttered, “Unbelievable… She’s so defenseless. Full of surprises, that one.”

Lazar’s eyes widened to hear the fondness lacing Oscar’s words.

In accordance with his promise to her, Oscar picked up the pace on his work. His irritation from earlier was all but gone, replaced with a mysteriously happy mood.

8. Answerless Prayer

A slightly cloudy sky hung over the white castle.

The dilution to the sun's potent rays made for comparatively pleasant weather for Farsas.

In a corner of the training grounds, Oscar reached a stopping point in Tinasha's practice and drew his sword back. Frowning curiously, he said, "You've got the basic techniques down."

"Before I became queen, I had a bit of an intensive crash course," she admitted, readjusting her grip on her practice sword and checking its feel. It was a little heavy, something that had always bothered her. She used magic to enhance her arm strength and made a few practice swings.

"Did someone from Farsas teach you?" Oscar inquired.

"What?! How did you know?"

"Your basic techniques are the traditional ones from my country's school of combat. I used to employ them, too," he explained.

"Whoa, you can tell from that? Yes, you're right," she admitted. Naturally, her basics were the traditional Farsas ones—Oscar had been the one to teach them to her.

Tinasha giggled, and he eyed her suspiciously. "How commendable of your former instructor to teach swordplay to a natural-born mage."

"Ah-ha-ha. He was a strict teacher but a very nice person. He was so dashing, and I learned a lot from him," recalled Tinasha, her dark eyes glowing with deep affection, which annoyed Oscar for some reason.

She slashed at him experimentally, and he parried her sword away as he muttered sarcastically, "I wish he would have done something about that recklessness of yours since he took the time to tutor you. You're an adult now, and you need to learn to work with others."

No sooner had the words left Oscar's lips than he realized he'd made a mistake. Anyone who taught Tinasha before she took the throne had to be dead now. He opened his mouth to apologize but broke off when he heard the woman laughing. She was doubled over as though he'd said something truly hilarious.

“Get mad at me like you always do. I don’t know what’s so funny…,” he insisted.

“Oh, n-no, don’t mind me…” Tinasha gasped, still shaking with amusement.

He gave her one glance and then clapped her on the shoulder with the flat of his blade. “As you get more actual battle experience, I think you’ll really improve. You’ve got good reflexes. Still, you’re weak, so don’t take an enemy strike head-on.”

“Understood.”

“I’ll try to check your progress every day, but you don’t need me—ask Als to practice with you,” Oscar advised, turning back to glance at the clock embedded into the outer castle wall. It was about time for him to be getting back. He walked up to Tinasha and patted her head. “That was some good exercise.”

“Thank you,” she said with a smile, taking his practice sword from him.

Oscar tore his eyes away from that graceful smile before it could swallow him. “All right, I’m heading back. See you.”

“I’ll come to make tea for you later,” Tinasha replied, waving good-bye to him. Immediately, a certain presence that had been waiting behind her this entire time appeared.

Another man’s voice sounded in her ear, low and taunting. “Well now, isn’t this an interesting thing you’re doing.”

She half smiled, without turning around. She replied calmly, “He’ll get mad if he finds out you’re here. Why did you save me?”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff. I do like strong opponents, but you can still get better. Work at it until we’re evenly matched in a fight. And don’t slack off, got it?”

“I think that will take a very long time…”

“Don’t complain. Maybe I’ll train him up, too; that sounds fun.”

“Stop it. Don’t involve him.”

There was a snort, and then the presence at her back vanished.

Sighing at the whims of her acquaintance, Tinasha left the training area to put the swords away. She never looked back.

※

Upon returning to his mansion, the man shrugged off his mage’s robe and sank into a chair. Gazing at the ceiling, he let out a deep sigh. A cup of tea was immediately placed before him, which he accepted with a smile.

The girl who gave it to him leaned against the armrest of his chair. “How did it go, Valt?”

“Both failed. They were caught. And here the timing is right and everything.”

“That’s because you used careless humans. We need to get a better pawn.”

“If I train a good one up, people find out about it. All we can do is take it easy. We’re still in the warm-up match,” Valt remarked breezily.

Miralys pursed her lips in dissatisfaction. “Will that really be all right?”

“Yes. No matter how powerful she is, it’s far preferable to when she was a witch. She’s considerably less experienced, now,” Valt explained, flashing Miralys a gentle, reassuring smile.

The wheel of fate had only just started to spin, very slowly.

Even if things got tough in the days to come, he saw nothing that would cause him to lose.

Valt was watching things play out from overhead, rather than down in the streets.

And he believed wholeheartedly that he could see the ending he longed for ahead.

※

Absorbed in her curse analysis, Tinasha didn’t notice the rapping at her door. After several more knocks, she finally answered, opening the door to find Oscar there. “Oh, is it already time for practice? Sorry I didn’t notice.”

“No, it’s not that. A tailor has come, and you’ve been summoned. Let’s go and take a look,” he said.

“A tailor?” Tinasha echoed, following after him.

The king explained to his international guest, “Every so often, a tailor comes to the castle with fabrics. I’m going to order some clothes.”

“Oh, I see…”

“She usually arrives much sooner, but apparently she spent a long time buying up her stock this year.”

“Huh. This is my first time with something like this,” admitted Tinasha.

Once Oscar brought Tinasha to the chamber where the tailor had been granted, he pushed her toward the dressmaker. “All right, measure her from head to toe.”

“Why?!” Tinasha protested.

“How else will she make you clothes?”

“I—I guess, but…,” Tinasha muttered, not quite sold on the idea as the tailor began to take her measurements. Oscar observed the process, quite entertained.

The two of them and the tailor were the only ones in the room filled with bolts of luxurious fabrics, but as Tinasha’s torture by measurement wore on, Als showed up with some documents for Oscar. Doan and Sylvia also popped in looking for Tinasha, a book on magic in hand.

Tinasha flipped through the tome and answered their questions as the tailor went about her work. “In Tuldarr, there’s a number of volumes explaining this. I’ll bring them with me next time.”

“Please do,” Doan said with a bow. No sooner had he done so than the dressmaker finally released Tinasha.

Oscar scrutinized the list of measurements with keen interest while Tinasha frowned unhappily. “Don’t look at that…”

“You really are stick thin. Not much muscle on you, either,” he remarked.

“That’s just how I’m built.”

“Well, you do look skinnier in clothes. You’re actually pretty curvy when you’re undressed.”

“Just who benefits from you making misleading statements like that?!” she exclaimed, her face bright red as she threw a punch at him.

“Well, *I’m* amused,” Oscar replied, catching her fist easily in his palm.

Als, Doan, and Sylvia wore expressions that were difficult to describe.

In a stormy mood, Tinasha summoned sealing ornaments to her. Keeping one eye on the young woman, Oscar picked out fabrics and started to hand them to the dressmaker. Once Tinasha had put on five sealing ornaments, she gave a resigned sigh. “Do I need to have clothes made for something?”

“No, it’s just what I’m into. You’ve been complaining about the heat lately, and you only wear light, casual outfits,” he said.

“It really is so hot here… Can I make some requests of my own?”

“Go for it. If you place an order now, it should be done by the time you go back. If it’s not, I’ll have it sent to you,” Oscar said, which made Tinasha remember that, in two months, she had to return to Tuldarr for her coronation. With all the recent events, time had passed in a flash.

“T-two months left… Will I finish in time?” she wondered absentmindedly.

“Don’t worry about it so much. You can do it anytime.”

“No, I can’t,” Tinasha insisted. Her original schedule was already strict, but the attack on Legis had delayed the process for more than a month. However, after she had extracted the configuration of the enchantment placed on him, her curse analysis was going much faster. Still, it was extremely difficult, and she’d had to stop many times to think.

If the spell that she once saw was really one she had crafted herself, then recognizing the quirks in her other self’s spell craft should have proved invaluable. Yet that was not the case. While Tinasha did pick out pieces that truly were like her, the majority of the array was crafted to align with the blessing spell the witch had originally placed on him.

Perhaps I simply need to give it more effort, she thought, which was when Oscar placed a hand on top of her head knowingly.

“You’ve started sword practice, so keep up with it. Two to three hours a day will be good,” he said.

“…Thank you,” she replied, looking up at him and giving him a somewhat pained smile as she nodded.

Oscar instructed the tailor to prioritize Tinasha’s order, then declined to have measurements taken for his own garments. Apparently, he couldn’t be bothered. Instead, he looked through the documents Als had brought. When

he got to the last page, a frown creased his handsome features. “This looks like it’ll be a pain.”

“Once we’ve had trusted people make a list of all the artifacts, we will seal off the underground labyrinth,” Als said.

“The underground labyrinth?!”

It was Tinasha who cried out wildly upon hearing that. The master of the castle and his three vassals all looked sour.

“Wow. There’s an underground labyrinth here? I want to see it,” she said.

“You’ll die,” Oscar replied.

“What?” asked Tinasha, unsure what he meant. Still, charmed by the idea of a subterranean maze, she pressed the issue. “Where’s the entrance?”

“The treasure vault.”

“Huh…?” Tinasha was baffled. It seemed unusual that a repository of valuables led to such a place, but this was a foreign country, after all. Tuldarr kept its treasure vault underground, so perhaps it was normal in Farsas to have a labyrinth beneath the sod instead.

As she mulled it over, Oscar explained. “Thieves broke into the treasure vault forty years ago. They escaped without anyone finding out what they stole. The king at the time…my grandfather, he bitterly regretted it and built a secret passage leading out of the castle from the vault.”

“What? Why would that lead him to build a secret passage?” questioned Tinasha.

“As bait for more thieves to sneak in. The passage was made into a maze filled with traps. It’s set up meticulously so that once someone enters, no one can open the door to it for a full day, except for royal family members. However, no one can open the door from the inside during that time. The design only allows two to three people in at once,” Oscar detailed.

“What was he thinking?” Tinasha said with disbelief.

“Maybe he thought it a game? I wish he’d organized and catalogued everything inside the vault instead… He was an odd one,” Oscar remarked.

The wild tale made Tinasha admit, “I can see how you’re related to him…”

“What was that?” Oscar said.

“Don’t pinch my cheek!” she cried, rubbing her reddened face and leaping away.

Als seized his chance to interject. “Is it really all right to seal off the labyrinth? The contents are still a total unknown.”

“Hmm, yeah…,” Oscar replied.

“Is there something inside?” Tinasha wanted to know.

“We don’t know,” Oscar stated, scratching his head in annoyance. “Ever since the labyrinth was built, no one’s gone inside. It’d be a problem if someone found their way into the treasure vault. The construction work was divided among craftsmen who only knew their own section, and the chief

mage who was privy to the entire maze's design is dead. It's admittedly unpleasant, but there's tales of a ghost craftsman who perished inside the labyrinth, although there's no record of any such death."

Sylvia covered her ears, shivering at such an unsettling story.

Musing on what she'd just heard, Tinasha tilted her head to one side. "This castle has quite the history."

"Yeah, although the labyrinth is only forty years old. Doesn't Tuldarr have stuff like this?" he asked.

"Nothing so interesting, no, especially not any ghost stories. I'm the closest thing to one," she answered.

"I see," Oscar replied, placing a thoughtful hand under his chin.

He still wanted to close off the underground labyrinth, but it would be just as troubling if it turned out something dangerous had been left there. They also didn't know where the exit led to. He really wasn't sure if sealing it off now was the right decision.

Oscar's gaze happened to land on Tinasha, who was perusing the spell book Doan and Sylvia had brought. He narrowed his eyes at her. "Tinasha, do you want to go into the labyrinth?"

"No thanks, I've heard enough."

"Let's both go in, then," he decided.

"Why?!"

Tinasha wasn't the only one who popped her head up in surprise. The other three reacted similarly.

"Y-Your Majesty, you're going to go in there?!"

"And you're taking Princess Tinasha, too…"

"It's perfect. Let's go take a quick look," Oscar declared, hauling up a still openmouthed Tinasha and laying her over his shoulder. He waved at Als, who was too stunned to respond. "We'll be back in a few hours."

He left the room, and Tinasha's shrieks echoed in from the hallway. "Hey! Hold on just a minute here!"

"Think of it as practice. You wanted to go in, didn't you?"

"I said I didn't want to anymore!"

As their voices grew more distant, the two mages and the general exchanged glances.

"What should we do…?" Sylvia asked, fretting.

"Those two are the strongest around, so won't it be fine?" Doan reasoned.

"Will we be fired if something happens?" Als muttered, and the two mages shrank back fearfully.

Doan believed that no matter what Oscar said about his grandfather, the apple didn't fall far from the tree.

※

Oscar entered the treasure vault, Tinasha kicking and struggling in his grasp. The guards stationed at the entrance looked surprised but remained silent. Once they were inside, he finally set her down on the ground.

Tinasha shook her head a little, dizzy after getting dragged around. “I don’t even know what to say about how forceful you are…”

“Here, take this sword,” Oscar instructed.

“Listen to what I’m saying!” Tinasha protested, though she accepted the slender blade he handed her. Unsheathing it a little, she saw it glowing with a faint-purple light: magic. “Is it all right to use this?”

“Swords are made to be used.”

“There’s plenty of exceptions to that…,” Tinasha grumbled, even as she fastened the weapon around her waist. As she did, Oscar touched a stone door at the back of the room. With a wrenching sound, it opened inward.

The king looked back and gestured to her to follow. “Come on, get a move on.”

“Won’t we get locked inside for a full day?” questioned Tinasha.

“Not if we find the exit,” the king countered.

“Ugh,” Tinasha grumbled, pulling off the sealing ornaments she had donned earlier and going over to him. Holding on to Oscar’s sleeve, she followed him in.

Inside, the passage was dark and entirely made of polished stone. Once they were a few steps in, the door behind closed silently.

It was only pitch-dark for a moment. Soon, the candelabras along the walls flared to life. Tinasha marveled at the sconces. Their placement seemed to invite one farther in. “That’s an incredible mechanism.”

“He was fastidious down to the details,” Oscar commented.

Tinasha turned back to inspect the door. After running a magic-infused hand over the surface, she nodded. “This is an enchanted device. I think I can open it from the inside.”

“That’s good.”

“Want to go back?”

“No,” Oscar stated, setting off to head farther in. Tinasha jogged to catch up with him.

Slowly, the passage sloped downward. The walls, floor, and ceiling, which were beautifully polished, began to turn rocky and rough. As Tinasha gazed all around her raptly, her companion suddenly yanked her back. Several arrows whistled past where she had been standing.

“Eek!”

“Put up a defensive barrier,” Oscar instructed, and Tinasha obeyed, weaving one that covered both of them.

Nervously, she reached out to get ahold of his cuff. “Don’t take off and leave me behind…”

“While I do kind of want to see your face if I did that, I definitely won’t.”

“If you do, I’ll punch through the ceiling to get out.”

“Don’t destroy my castle. Just teleport.”

As the pair continued, the temperature grew cooler. For a place untouched for so long, the air was relatively clear, suggesting a draft. They pressed deeper, dodging numerous traps all the while.

"For a labyrinth, this is a pretty straight path. I'm grateful, but it's odd," Oscar commented.

"Maybe your grandfather simply wished to call it a labyrinth," Tinasha suggested, gazing at the ceiling as she shivered. It was nice and cool underground, but it was edging on the side of *too* chilly. Unlike Oscar, a native of Farsas, she was dressed lightly owing to the warm weather. Her shoulders, arms, and legs were exposed.

Oscar gave her a sidelong look. "You cold?"

"I'm fine. I can adjust the temperature inside the barrier. More importantly, isn't it getting more humid down here?"

"…I hear the sound of water," he said unhappily. Tinasha didn't care to respond. Soon enough, she, too, caught the noise of something dripping.

The stone passage opened to an underground lake. It made for a mystical scene, though both Oscar and Tinasha came to a halt before it with displeased expressions.

"What in the world is *that…*? Why is there a pool underneath your castle? Is the foundation all right?"

"I'm sure it's fine; the lake's not that big, after all. But isn't this…the Lake of Silence?"

Oscar sounded awestruck, and Tinasha frowned at him.

He was right—the body of water was not especially sizable, being only slightly larger than a pond. The ceiling curved in what appeared to be a natural arc that blended in seamlessly with the rock walls.

The path they were on ran along the outer edge of the lake, then extended out over it from a certain point. The trail was bare stone without any railing, winding over the oval-shaped lake before landing on the opposite shore.

Far in the distance, there were three things that resembled doors set into the rock face on the wall opposite the two.

Tinasha gazed at the black surface of the water, glimmering with reflections of the flickering candle flames. "What's the Lake of Silence?"

"An old legend in Farsas. It's where the inhuman being pulled Akashia from the water. The story goes that people came and settled around it, but there was never any lake that fit its description, so most thought of it as only a legend. Never did I imagine that the castle was built on top of it…," Oscar explained, checking to make sure Akashia was still at his waist.

The weapon was far more mysterious than the mystical spirits of Tuldarr, which everyone knew belonged to the demonic race. Enigma shrouded not only Akashia's powers, but its origins as well.

Tinasha stepped up to the water's edge carefully and examined the surface. "You can't tell how deep it is. And I also feel an…unpleasant presence."

“An unpleasant presence?” Oscar repeated.

“Mmm… Maybe it’s just my imagination,” Tinasha admitted, shaking her head and returning to his side. She looked up at him a little helplessly. “I—I actually don’t know how to swim…”

“…I’ll remember that. Once we get back, you should practice. You can use the large bath in the castle.”

“Okay…”

The king clapped her reassuringly on the shoulder and then set off. She followed closely behind him.

They moved along the path that snaked around and across the lake. The stone paving was only a little bit higher than the water level. If a wave came, the trail would get flooded easily. The waters were like a polished mirror, and Tinasha eyed them as she muttered, “I wonder if there’s anything living in there.”

“Who knows? Doesn’t look like there’s any food around,” replied Oscar.

“I’ve only seen aquatic creatures in books, but I don’t like the way they look. It’s creepy how big they are. I’ve heard there’s a giant squid in the northern ocean depths,” Tinasha said fretfully.

“I’ve never been to the ocean, either,” Oscar offered calmly as he led the way.

The path curved to the right and then to the left, sometimes winding so close to itself that jumping across was possible, but as the two didn’t know what was ahead, they decided it best not to do so. Candelabras lined the trail at regular intervals, their orange glow dancing on the water.

By the time they reached the middle of the lake, Oscar and Tinasha could now clearly make out the doors on the other side.

“Why are there three?” Oscar mused.

“Perhaps two of them are the wrong way,” Tinasha offered, trudging along after Oscar. She thought she saw a shadow appear below the glassy lake’s surface, and she looked over. But nothing seemed amiss.

Puzzling over it as she turned forward again, there came a splashing sound behind her.

“Huh?”

The next thing Tinasha knew, she was upside down and staring back at Oscar’s panic-stricken face.

Noticing something strange, Oscar couldn’t believe his eyes and turned back.

A half-translucent gigantic tentacle was holding Tinasha aloft and squeezing around her. Bound fast, her lovely face was contorted in pain and shock.

The appendage then tried to drag her down into the depths, but Oscar ran over and lopped it off. At the same time, Tinasha used a wordless spell to crush the part of it that bound her.

She tried to support herself as she fell through the air, but another tentacle appeared from behind and got ahold of her.

With a loud, rushing splash, she disappeared into the water.

"That idiot!" Oscar cursed, jumping off the stone path and diving in. Amid the dark depths, he could make out Tinasha's white limbs and a dozen tentacles surrounding her and dragging her down.

Oscar swam down, Akashia aimed toward the limbs that came at him. With his face screwed up as he pushed the sword against the water's resistance, Oscar still managed to use his physical strength to sever a tentacle.

After repelling a third one, he searched for Tinasha, but she was hard to locate amid all the grasping appendages.

That was when magic burst forth from somewhere in the lake, with a young woman at the center.

It was a violent magical explosion, not constrained by any spell, and the blast sent transparent bits of flesh flying. Oscar pushed his way through those, cutting down weakly trembling tentacles as he went, and finally grabbed Tinasha's hand. She had gone unconscious, and he tucked her under his arm and kicked toward the surface.

He deposited her onto the stone path, then pulled himself up onto it as well. Oscar bent over Tinasha and found she was breathing. He then checked to make sure she had a pulse before laying her out flat and pressing both hands against her abdomen.

On the second push, she spit up water and opened her eyes. She rolled onto her side, curling into a fetal position. "Th-thank you…"

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I-it hurts."

"I didn't press on you that hard," he retorted.

"No, not that… I think my ribs are broken," she explained, her voice tight with pain. The defensive barrier was still up, so the creature had wounded her through it. Were it not for that protection, Tinasha might have suffered a far graver injury.

Her internal organs probably weren't damaged, but Oscar still knit his brow as he asked, "Can you heal it?"

"About that… I don't think I can use magic…"

"What? What do you mean?"

Tinasha's eyes darted all around, as if searching for something. Reluctantly, she answered, "This lake… I think it has the same properties as Akashia. Touching it only gives me a slightly unpleasant feel, but now that I've swallowed some water, my internal magic is disrupted, and I can't cast spells. I can force out power, but I can't heal anything."

"What in the…?" Oscar muttered.

So this really is the legendary lake.

That revelation was hardly useful at the moment, however. Oscar looked down at Tinasha suspiciously. "When you say it's the same as Akashia…you mean that's enough to make you unable to use magic?"

“Yes. That sword has incredible powers. It’s not just that magic doesn’t work against it. A touch from it will dissolve a mage’s magic and render them unable to cast spells,” she explained.

“I didn’t know that. How come you know?”

“It’s a secret,” Tinasha managed. Oscar wanted to pinch her cheek, but that would be too mean to someone with broken ribs. Instead, he moved to pick her up, but she refused. “That will make things difficult if something else shows up, and I can walk on my own.”

“All right, but…how long until you can use magic again?”

“Judging by how things feel, half a day to a full day,” she answered.

“If you can’t use magic…that means you’re basically useless.”

“I’m aware of that! You don’t need to say it!”

“I was joking. Sorry for dragging you into this.”

When Tinasha heard that, a mixture of expressions filtered across her face. Oscar led her along by the hand, walking half a step ahead and radiating guilt. She looked up at him. “Now we can’t get out using the entrance.”

“I planned on leaving from the exit from the start anyway, so it doesn’t matter,” he answered.

Tinasha’s eyes fell to her hand linked with his. She was soaked and chilled to the bone, but his grip felt warm and reassuring.

They reached the far shore without incident and came to stand side by side in front of the doors.

“Now let’s figure out which are the wrong ones,” Tinasha stated.

“What’s right and what’s wrong?”

“If you died, wouldn’t that make it the wrong door?” she countered unsettlingly.

Ignoring that, Oscar started to inspect the doors. He stopped before the leftmost one. “This one…looks a little familiar. I’m going to open it, so stand back.”

“How exciting,” Tinasha commented dryly, sounding disinterested.

He pressed the point of Akashia against a sigil engraved in the door. After a few moments, it slowly opened inward. Tinasha stared at it in shock.

Oscar peered inside the room, breathed a sigh of relief, and called her over. “C’mere. It’s all right.”

“What?”

Beyond lay a spacious room carpeted in red. A table, chair, bed, and desk were arranged inside. The chamber looked exactly like a luxurious royal’s quarters. In the back was a door leading to another place.

Tinasha took in the design of the chamber. It resembled Oscar’s own bedroom but sported even more lavish furnishings; the young king didn’t like having too many decorations. Tinasha tilted her head to one side curiously. “What is this place…?”

“It must be…Grandpa’s little hideaway spot,” Oscar muttered disdainfully.

The area had no signs of age, suggesting that magic maintained it. Oscar stepped farther in and picked up a book lying on the desk. It was an adventure novel well-known in Farsas, with a bookmark placed at the back. He drew out the discolored bookmark, tutting at the name and handwriting on it. No doubt about it, this was his grandfather's.

Tinasha stared at the ceiling in a daze. "I guess someone did come down here after the labyrinth was built."

"Looks like it," Oscar said.

"Was that monster out there his pet or something?" asked Tinasha.

"I doubt that," the king responded dismissively, heading to the back of the room to inspect what lay beyond. Three small chambers adjoined this one: a library, a clothes closet, and a bathroom.

Tinasha peeked into the bathroom from behind Oscar. "If that pumps out fresh water, I want to wash off the lake gunk on me."

"Hmm. I suppose it's unlikely that it draws from the lake." Oscar turned the handle. A small amount of muddy water spilled out, but then it turned clear and steamy.

"Wow. I wonder where it's coming from," Tinasha posited aloud.

"The castle, probably."

A lot of work had gone into this place. Surely, that meant there was another method of egress. Oscar left Tinasha to her bath and returned to the main room, thinking back on his mischievous grandfather.

Once Tinasha had rinsed herself, she emerged wearing a white dress borrowed from the closet. She pushed Oscar toward the bathroom next. Her wet clothes, still dangerously contaminated with the powerful lake water, were folded and placed inside a leather bag. The sword Oscar had given her remained at her side, though.

By the time Oscar emerged from the bathroom, Tinasha was sitting on the bed, bare from the waist up as she wound cloth around her torso in lieu of bandages.

Her black locks flowed down over one shoulder, revealing her alabaster back.

Noticing his presence, Tinasha said without turning around, "Did you wash all the water off?"

"…Yes."

"Perfect timing, then. Come help me. I can't get it tight enough on my own."

Oscar opened his mouth to say something but held his tongue. He walked over to the bed and grabbed ahold of both ends of the cloth Tinasha was wrestling with. As he adjusted what portion she'd already wound around herself, he started to pull it taught. "Tell me if gets too tight."

"I'm fine. Just pull it as much as you can," she replied. Normally, Tinasha dried her hair with magic, but now it was damp and dripping, lending it a bewitching magnetism. The slightest bit of sweat beaded the vulnerable curve of her back from her soft nape down.

As Oscar bound the young woman, he said in an emotionless voice, “Right now you’re just an ordinary woman.”

“My magic is the only thing I have to offer, after all,” Tinasha remarked self-deprecatingly. Oscar was unsure of her expression. All he could see was the alluring white glow of her shoulders.

His eyes moved over her skin, so sticky to the touch. A faint floral scent tickled his nose.

This was his second time touching Tinasha’s back, but unlike the first, when the suffocating stench of blood almost made him fly into a rage, now her velvety skin seemed almost an enchantment unto itself.

Oscar looked down at her slender neck. The temptation to kiss that ivory nape surged within him. He could run his tongue along the gentle curve of her back and take her petite body into his arms. Every single part of her almost demanded he dominate and monopolize it.

The king rubbed the back of his neck, stirred up as he was by these smoldering passions. An inquiry from Tinasha snapped him back to his senses. “Oscar? Is it done?”

“…Yeah,” he answered, letting go and taking a step back.

Tinasha thanked him as she pulled the bodice of her dress back up. The collared, long-sleeved garment was of another era, but she wore it perfectly. It made her resemble a doll. Oscar had also taken some clothes out of the closet, but the men’s outfits weren’t so out of place.

Suddenly overcome with mental fatigue, Oscar gave Tinasha’s head a light rap. “Why don’t you have any sense of danger?! The two of us are all alone in here; you should be more on guard!”

“What? But you already helped me rinse off my back that one time… I thought it would be fine…”

“That’s not the issue here!” he snapped.

The young woman bit her lip, finding this odd. However, she quickly smiled and bowed her head. “Thank you very much for what you did. Also, I’m sorry.”

Tinasha was a little embarrassed, but only because she remembered how she had acted like a petulant child. She remained as clueless as ever. Ultimately, parts of her hadn’t changed since she was a girl. That was why she behaved so carefree and affectionately with the people closest to her.

Oscar turned his face away. “I didn’t do anything you need to thank me for.”

He hated how Tinasha relaxed around him because she was convinced he didn’t have any interest in her. However, that notion was one Oscar had fostered, a trap of his own design.

Tinasha giggled. “I wanted to offer my gratitude anyway. It’s funny…I came here for you, but it seems you’re always rescuing me.”

The words felt venomously sweet. Oscar remembered her saying she had slept for four hundred years specifically to meet him, and he felt slightly dizzy.

He sat in a chair a few paces from Tinasha and sighed as he responded, “Don’t joke about that. You’ve helped me plenty.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. How are your ribs feeling?”

“A little swollen, but all right. I’m pretty tolerant of pain,” Tinasha confessed, a smile blooming across her face.

Beholding her expression, Oscar felt like he understood why that king had destroyed a queen’s country in order to have that woman, at least a little. Under his breath, he whispered, “Careful…”

The distinct feeling that they should not be cooped up in this room alone washed over the man. Both he and Tinasha held positions they could not carelessly disregard.

Oscar exhaled, resetting himself, and said to the person he brought along against her will, “If you’re in pain, you can sleep here. I’ll come and get you tomorrow.”

“I’m not sure I like that idea either…,” she said, looking around the room from her seated position on the bed. “Are you really going to seal this off? There’s quite a few magical objects in here.”

“You can tell that?”

“I still have my magic, even if I can’t cast spells.”

Crossing his legs and leaning back in the chair, Oscar remembered when they went up against the forbidden curse. The world looked completely different through Tinasha’s eyes. “Can anyone see that sort of thing if they practice?”

“No. There’s those who can and those who can’t.”

“What? It sounded useful. Now I’m disappointed,” Oscar complained.

“You’re one of the ones who can,” Tinasha retorted, hugging her knees to her chest.

Oscar’s eyes grew wide. “I can?”

“Probably, if you concentrate.”

“How do I do it?” he asked.

Tinasha thought for a while, head cocked pensively, then stood up and went over to him. She set a thick book down on the table. “Think of this book as the world we live in. Right now, all you can see is the cover of the book. But in reality, there are countless invisible pages just beyond the cover…or to put it more accurately, existing in the same place as the cover.”

She flipped through the book’s pages, then closed it again and snapped her fingers. “Remember that the world you can see is only one page of what’s truly there. Try to visualize it as things written in a different script on top. There, the flow of magic and spell configurations exist, with the rules of magic above them. You should be able to see all that if you believe you can picture those forces. It’s like looking at the flow of water or wind.”

“Got it, I think…?”

“It differs from person to person whether they can see it right away. I think you’ll succeed with concentration. To be totally honest, with how good you are with a sword and the fact that you have Akashia, a mage would be helpless against you at close range if you could see spells, too. You’d be far beyond the natural enemy of mages—you’d absolutely be the hunter,” Tinasha stated.

“I’m that much of a threat?”

“Yes. I would never get close were I fighting you. I’d bomb you from the sky.” The Witch Killer Queen had a look of utmost revulsion. It was enough for Oscar to realize his own potential. He even felt a vague sense of alarm at how easily she could talk about hunting mages.

Ultimately, Oscar was just one man, though. No matter how powerful an individual was, they were nothing more than a tiny dot in the world.

Shaking his head lightly, Oscar shelved those thoughts for the time being. “Maybe I’ll put the decision of whether to seal this off on hold… We still have more to check up ahead, I think. To think the Lake of Silence was down here all along…”

“I would curse you if you drew up that lake water,” Tinasha cautioned.

“You hate it that much, huh…?”

She grinned, but her eyes weren’t smiling. Then she changed the subject. “So why are you organizing the treasure vault all of a sudden? Looking for something?”

“Oh yeah, I guess I didn’t tell you. That shady cult was after something in the repository, but we don’t know what it was,” Oscar explained.

“You don’t?”

“Actually, it’s more accurate to say we don’t know what it was used for. We also don’t know where it’s kept, so I thought it was time to organize everything. Apparently, it was a red orb inside a small palm-shaped box. Have you seen it?” Oscar said, using his hands to indicate the size and shape of the object.

All the blood drained from Tinasha’s face. She covered her mouth with both hands, shaking minutely.

The king looked up in shock. “What is it?”

“Don’t touch it…”

“Huh?”

“Don’t touch that orb! Don’t let anyone… No, don’t look for it…,” Tinasha pleaded, burying her face in her hands.

Oscar jumped out of his seat and circled the table to stand next to her. He took both of her hands and saw that the young woman appeared on the verge of tears. “What do you know?”

He looked into Tinasha’s dark, wet eyes. Peering into them struck him with the sensation of gazing into an abyss. Beyond, it was so deep that he couldn’t see how far they went.

After a moment, Tinasha straightened up, though her lip still trembled with worry. Then, suddenly, she cast her eyes downward and shook her head.

"Don't leave me…," she whispered feebly.

No matter how Oscar soothed or threatened her, Tinasha would offer no more. Her stubbornness proved reasonably irritating. He wanted to ask why she didn't trust him.

As Oscar turned back around to Tinasha for the dozenth time, he noticed for the first time that her forehead was beaded with cold sweat. At some point, her wan cheeks had grown red. Placing a hand against her forehead, he found that she was shockingly warm. He didn't know if it was due to her broken ribs or falling into the water, but she had a very high fever.

"Why didn't you mention you were sick?!" he snapped at her, picking the woman up and carrying her to the bed.

Tinasha was evidently already growing woozy and closed her eyes in pain once she was laid down. "I'm sorry…"

"Get some sleep. I'm going to go look around," Oscar stated, dabbing sweat from Tinasha's forehead, and then left the room.

He inspected the other two doors again. Unlike the one they went through that had the royal family's crest engraved on it, the other doors had no markings of any kind.

First, Oscar unsheathed Akashia and pressed on the middle door. Cracking it open slightly, he peered inside. It was dark, and he couldn't see to the end of the space, but he sensed multiple creatures inside and heard their cries.

Numerous red eyes glittered at him from the shadow. He went ahead and closed that door.

"Okay, let's try the next one."

Oscar tried the final door—the rightmost. This one opened onto a narrow passage made entirely of polished stone on all four sides. The same candelabras that illuminated other chambers were set in this one, revealing an innumerable array of ostentatiously installed traps. Oscar let out a dry laugh when he saw huge circular blades moving back and forth, some at knee level and some at waist height.

"He really had some taste."

Oscar decided not to venture any farther than that. Standing before the three doors, he fell into thought.

Were he alone, he could explore more and dispatch whatever came his way. Unfortunately, he had a feverish Tinasha with him. It would be next to impossible to handle either room with her in tow, and leaving her alone was out of the question.

He scanned the lake chamber but failed to discover any means of exit besides the three doors. Ultimately, he returned to check on Tinasha.

She was on the bed, asleep, curled up like a cat. He used a wet cloth to sponge away the sweat on her forehead. Her eyes fluttered at the touch.

“Leave me and go… I’ll return once my magic’s recovered…”

“There’s no way I’m doing that,” Oscar replied, sitting on the bed and carding his fingers through her still-damp hair.

As he lost himself in feeling her glossy, silky locks, she whispered weakly, “Oscar… There’s an orb like that in Tuldarr, too. The color is different, though…”

His eyes widened at the unexpected bit of information, and his hands froze. “Really?”

“I sealed away the one in Tuldarr four hundred years ago.”

“Sealed it away? So it’s something dangerous?” he asked.

“It’s an anomaly of magical history—an unknown. The power it has should be impossible. That orb can…transport the user to the past. That’s something no mage or demon can do.”

“…What?” Oscar questioned in disbelief. But since he wasn’t familiar with magic, he didn’t realize just how impossible this was. “That’s definitely a dangerous object, yet it could be convenient if used correctly.”

“No… Your world vanishes. Everything that exists now disappears, time rewinds, and you must do it all over again from that point… There’d be no original world or time to return to,” Tinasha explained, closing her eyes. Tears flowed onto the bed from her long black eyelashes. “I know someone who lost his life to that power…”

As her sobs soaked the white sheets, Oscar sat there astonished. He recalled something Tinasha had said before.

“…When I was young, someone saved my life. Yet by doing so…he ended up losing his past and future—everything.”

Now it was all clear. Oscar placed his hands on either side of Tinasha’s face and gazed at her. “The man who saved you…?”

The pale woman opened her dark eyes and stared at him. Then, as if nodding, she very slowly closed them again.

The anxiety of someone left all alone in the world colored her tear-stained face. Tinasha put her own hands on top of Oscar’s, stroking them gently, seeking confirmation. The warmth of them made his heart ache.

What had she gone through when she was younger? It was heartbreaking to see her grieve the transience of life.

After staring at her crying in silence, Oscar leaned down and whispered in her ear, “I’m not going anywhere. I don’t want to change the past. If you don’t like that orb, I won’t search for it, and you can seal it away.”

His tone wasn’t gentle—he was simply making a promise to her.

“So…don’t cry so hard.”

While the king didn’t let his emotions show, though, he felt no hesitation.

Tears streamed down Tinasha’s cheeks as she nodded.

At last, Tinasha fell into a deep sleep. Meanwhile, Oscar began to thoroughly inspect the chamber.

If this was his grandfather’s hideaway spot, then there had to be a shortcut here that bypassed the treasure vault. Painstakingly, he inspected

the walls and the backs of the bookshelves. As he did, he kept thinking about what Tinasha said.

An orb that could alter the past. It sounded ludicrous, but it had to be true if she was the one claiming as much. Compared to mages who were versed in the rules of magic, Oscar had an easier time accepting it.

“I never expected there would be a magic implement that could take you to the past and change the future,” he whispered to himself.

There were certainly many people who wished they could do things over, but it was impossible to ask, so their hopes were in vain. There was no guarantee that altering one point in time would make everything after that go the way they desired. Things could even unfold in a *worse* manner than they originally had. Moreover, the price was that initial world. It was a risky gamble, and that was being generous.

What was the man who saved Tinasha after?

If his goal was merely to save her, then he must have been incredibly devoted. But in exchange, his act left her obsessing and crying all the time. Oscar let out a sigh without meaning to.

“What did she mean by ‘*Don’t leave me*’…?”

His face screwed up in an annoyed grimace as he rummaged around at the back of a bookshelf.

Why had he been the only one able to enter the room where she was sleeping all those years? Why had Nark recognized him as its master?

Tinasha had claimed it was because he was similar to the man who had saved her. Oscar had caught her doing or saying mysterious things at other points, too.

The most curious thing of all was Tinasha’s decision to enter stasis for four hundred years.

Putting all those pieces together led him to one conclusion.

“…There we go. This must be it.”

Oscar reached a hand under the bookshelf and pulled a small metal lever there.

With a creak, the piece of furniture immediately slid aside, revealing a concealed staircase. Oscar climbed a few steps cautiously, wary of any traps or monsters, then went back to the bed.

“Tinasha, we can get out,” he said, but she showed no signs of waking. He wrapped her in the blanket and picked her up.

She was soaked through with sweat and appeared totally miserable. Gazing at her, Oscar was reminded of when they had first met.

“You knew my name all along…”

The way Tinasha had spoken his name with complete conviction left no doubt in his mind.

However, Oscar discarded the conclusion.

Even if it was true, he had no memory of that, which meant that the past had been redone, and he was a different form of himself. No matter how hard Tinasha cried, the original could never be restored.

And it was because she was intimately familiar with all of this that she avoided that orb.

What was gone could not return. Creating something new was the only way.

Regardless, Tinasha had her duties, and they would soon take her from Farsas. Oscar had to put a stop to this before he got too attached to let her go.

He would create nothing. Notice nothing. And spend the remaining two months that way.

"…So ridiculous."

Had the man who saved her predicted that things would play out like this? Oscar stared down at the unconscious woman in his arms, a wry smile curling his lips.

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Tinasha jolted awake and looked all around her. She was lying flat on her back in her pitch-black room in Farsas Castle.

Gingerly, she levered herself up to a sitting position, noting a faint sense of discomfort. An unfamiliar pain-relief spell had been applied to her, probably for her ribs.

"Ah… Someone cast this on me," she muttered as she checked her magic. She could use it again. Undoing the pain-relief spell, she mended her damaged ribs. As she glanced out at the bluish-white moon hanging in the sky beyond her window, she checked the time.

"I wonder if Oscar's still awake…"

Awaking here must have meant that Oscar had brought her out of the labyrinth. Hopefully, that hadn't been too much trouble for him. Tinasha wanted to thank him either way. And she also just wished to talk with the man.

Raking back her sleep-mussed hair, Tinasha got up to change clothes. Done with his work and dressed in his nightclothes, Oscar looked up at the sound of rapping on the door that led to his balcony. Suspiciously, he went over with Akashia in hand.

There stood Tinasha, her white skin glowing a pale blue in the moonlight.

"Why are you coming in from the balcony?" he asked.

"I didn't know how to get here from inside the castle…"

He let her in, and she sauntered over to the table. Oscar frowned to see that she had changed into a light, simple, childlike outfit. "Did you heal your ribs? I liked what you were wearing before, though."

"I'll return that garment later. Sorry about that."

"It's fine. No one else was wearing it," Oscar replied, sitting on his bed and gazing up at her. He paused, unsure.

"How did we get back?" asked Tinasha.

“There was a hidden passage. It leads to a royal apartment that’s no longer in use. I left you in the castle and went to go investigate the other chambers, but both of the other doors just lead back to the castle,” Oscar explained.

“What? So then, what does that mean?”

“It means the only way in or out of the labyrinth is through the castle,” he grumbled, feeling angry all over again just recalling that.

While fending off a wolf that appeared to be some sort of magical creature, he’d followed the path along countless twists and turns before it finally straightened out only to lead to the trap-filled room on the far right. He was very glad he hadn’t brought Tinasha along in her fevered state.

“By the way, everyone yelled at me when I brought you back. Even Als did, and he never raises his voice at me,” Oscar said.

“I-I’m sorry…”

“Well, it was my fault.”

He had absconded with the next queen of their northwestern neighbor and brought her back with broken ribs and a fever. An unending barrage of criticism was natural.

Oscar pulled his knees in close to his chest and looked up at the canopy of his bed. “I put off organizing the treasure vault. We only considered the idea because of that cult anyway. They worship some god named Simila. Never heard of it.”

Shock flickered across Tinasha’s face. “I think I have…”

“Really? Where?”

“Uh, I can’t remember… Tomorrow I’ll go and get some books from Tuldarr and look into it,” she replied.

“Okay, please do.”

Though Tinasha nodded, her eyes were still darting around as she carded through her memories.

Oscar went on. “So what do you want to do about the orb? You can seal it away, if you like.”

At that, Tinasha faltered for a moment. She stared back at Oscar and asked, “But…isn’t it your mother’s heirloom?”

“Is it?” Oscar frowned. He’d never heard that before.

Immediately, Tinasha clapped a hand over her mouth, realizing her slip of the tongue. She had assumed this Oscar would know that. As she paled, the young king looked askance at her.

Tinasha, who had been asleep for centuries, shouldn’t have known anything about his mother, who died fifteen years prior. Her familiarity with Oscar’s mother’s connection to a magic implement was even more suspicious. The other Oscar must have told Tinasha about this.

Holding back a deep sigh, Oscar maintained outward calm as he said, “Then I’ll inquire with my dad. Still, I doubt he’ll care if it’s sealed. We don’t want anyone getting ahold of it.”

“O-okay…”

Oscar let out that sigh when he saw Tinasha's searching gaze. He felt no hesitation. This was something that had been decided four hundred years ago.

"Listen, Tinasha—I don't know anything, and I don't want to. I trust you, so if you have some warning for me, I'll heed it gratefully. If there's anything you wish for, I'll grant it as long as it's within the realm of possibility. Those are all things I'm choosing to do. I won't have any complaints or regrets. Same goes for any decision I make."

The woman was still hung up on the past, however. Oscar gazed straight into her dark eyes.

"Don't let it weigh you down anymore."

The words cut straight to the heart of the matter. Tinasha's eyes widened. "Oscar, have you…?"

A pale glow poured in from the window, throwing her face into sharp relief and drawing a shadow behind her.

Oscar dropped his gaze to the floor, looking only at her shadow.

He knew that this was tantamount to pushing Tinasha away after she had traveled four centuries for him.

Yet from Oscar's perspective, that bygone era had no bearing on the present. He couldn't bury something that never existed. All he could give Tinasha was what he had. It seemed heartless, but that was his honest truth.

And Oscar believed that was how she should be, too. There was no need for her to be a captive of the past.

Tinasha's shadow didn't even flicker.

He looked up, worried that she had started crying, but instead he gasped.

As moonlight illuminated Tinasha's form, her eyes glowed with a clear light. Her lips were turned up in the littlest smile.

It was the first time she had worn such a pure and clear expression.

She placed a hand over her heart. "I'm very glad I came to this era and met you. I've only been awake for four months, but I've been given enough blessings for a lifetime."

Tinasha beamed with genuine, untainted joy.

Her dark eyes glimmered with moisture as she gazed at Oscar. The instant their gazes met, she launched herself at him and threw her slender arms around his neck.

She was warmth embodied. "So…I don't need anything more than this," came her tear-choked whisper.

It was like she was declaring a fact that couldn't change—and would never.

There was no sadness in it, for she did not choose to express that. Oscar felt the woman's grip around him tighten. "Even if we go our separate ways after this, you are my—"

Tinasha broke off there, pulled back, and looked at Oscar from very close.

Her smile was enchanting and filled with love. Their eyes met, and Oscar was struck speechless, his soul enthralled.

Just as a shapeless impulse urged him to speak her name, Tinasha floated up into the air.

“Good night…and thank you for today,” she said before teleporting back to her room.

The shadow was one.

Now there was only Oscar and moonlight… He stayed as he was for a long while, gazing at where she had been.

9. Invisible Face

Four men had met in a room in the dimly lit castle.

Three of them had suntanned skin and well-built bodies, indicating that they drilled for battle day in, day out. The other was middle-aged, his hair just beginning to thin, and his attire was luxurious.

He looked to the little assembly. “The princess is in the way. We have to do something to stop her coronation.”

“But will things still work if something happens to her?” offered one of the other men.

The elder man fell into thought. After a moment of indecision, he made up his mind. “It doesn’t matter. They’re only crowning a figurehead anyway. The times have changed.”

His three constituents inhaled sharply at that. They were all determined to make a difference.

The man continued heatedly. “From now on, stable domestic affairs and foreign diplomacy are going to drive this country, as well as military strength. If the royal family doesn’t have the power to adapt, then we have no choice but to take their place. You can think of this as a revolution.”

Fierce determination oozed from him. The other three breathed in this ambition, won over by the words.

※

“All right, which of these rings do you think is the magic one?” Tinasha questioned, sitting in a patch of shade on the training grounds during a break from her regular practice. A silver ring wrought in an antique style lay atop each of her palms.

After gazing at them for a while, Oscar pointed. “That one.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Intuition,” he replied immediately.

Tinasha dismissed the rings and crossed her arms. Her shapely brows knit. “You do have very good intuition, but I don’t think that’s what guides your selection. Did you actually sense the magic coming from one of them?”

“If I had, I wasn’t consciously aware of it. All I felt was that something was different,” he said.

“Hmm… I’d like you to be a little more attuned than that,” admitted Tinasha, turning her right palm up and casting a spell there instantaneously. She infused it with magic and made the array visible. A three-dimensional sigil formed of intertwined red threads floated in her hand. “You see it, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. I’m going to make it fade, little by little,” she said, starting to adjust the magic. Very slowly, the red threads faded away until they disappeared.

But to those who could see magic, the spell was still visible right where it was.

Oscar stared at it. Once it was fully invisible, Tinasha asked, “Can you see it?”

“I can see some warping. It’s like that spot has water on it,” he answered.

“Hmm.”

She recited a short incantation, this time camouflaging it. The spell gradually faded away, cloaked to the point that an ordinary mage wouldn’t be able to see it. “What about now?”

“It feels weird.”

“You really do have good intuition…,” Tinasha commented, shaking her head somewhat exasperatedly as she made the spell vanish. Hugging her knees to her chest, she glanced up at the leaves of the big tree they were under. “Through repeated practice, someone like you might be able to see spells.”

“Then how about you give me some of that practice?”

“Hmm… Okay, just a little bit,” she agreed.

The two stood and moved a distance away from each other, like they often did for sword practice.

Tinasha gave a light swing of her practice sword. “Don’t move. I’ll create a spell that can be undone if you block its core with a normal sword. But it won’t come undone if you don’t touch the core, even if you hit the rest of the spell. Got it?”

“Got it,” Oscar said.

Weapon in hand, Tinasha spread her hands wide. Ten palm-size balls of light appeared before her chest. He narrowed his eyes at them.

“Go.”

With her soft but pointed order, the balls of light took to the air at varying speeds. They spread out, heading for Oscar. He awaited them, sword at the ready, and slashed at the first sphere to reach him. His blade pierced its center, and it winked out of sight. He then held his weapon horizontally and sliced at a sphere coming toward him from the right. Like

the first, he punctured the core, but it pushed forward regardless and struck his shoulder. It tapped against him, then bounced off.

“Focus on seeing them. Broaden your senses,” Tinasha instructed.

“Okay,” Oscar replied as the sphere flew at him. Controlling his breathing, he raised his sword.

He concentrated, keeping his nerves taut.

With his eyes fixed on the light sphere, he saw a rippling on the inside of it.

He cut the third one a little to the upper left. It dissipated.

The fourth one slipped past his sword and hit his chest.

I need to hone my concentration better.

Oscar kept his senses sharp and his field of vision broad as he watched his target. The rippling inside the sphere grew a little clearer and more visible. He could tell that two white circles were joined together there.

Holding his breath, Oscar slashed at that meeting point.

Tinasha whipped up more magic spheres, restraining an admiring sigh.

There were still globes Oscar failed to strike in the right place, but he was gradually getting more right than wrong. Eventually, Tinasha began mixing in invisible spheres, yet Oscar succeeded against a fair number of those, too.

Unlike Tinasha’s prowess with a sword, Oscar’s magical vision was something inborn in him. It didn’t take the man long to adjust. Moreover, he possessed a naturally accurate intuition. His reactions were possibly even swifter than a typical mage’s. Tinasha stopped creating new spells and lifted up her hands.

“Let’s stop here for now. If you jump into too much at once, there could be some backlash, and that wouldn’t help at all,” she called.

“Sure. Thank you, I feel like I more or less figured it out. Did you undergo drills like these, too?” asked Oscar.

“I’ve been able to see magic for as long as I can remember. It’s actually harder to suppress my sensitivity when I don’t need to use it.”

Even then, Tinasha couldn’t dismiss her magical vision completely. It wasn’t impossible, but because she never knew what might be there, she always stayed aware to some degree. The world appeared considerably different through her eyes than it did to people without magic. If one pondered that, though, they would realize that everyone saw the world only from their perspective. There were differences in every view.

Oscar glanced up at the clock set into the castle wall. “I’ve taken up a lot of your time. Sorry about that.”

“Not at all. I’m the one who asked you for lessons. Let’s try some magic training for a while, too,” Tinasha suggested.

“Yeah, that would really help.”

Tinasha trotted over and happily nestled close as they set off. Oscar patted her head roughly, thinking her rather like a cat curling around his legs.

For a time, things passed peacefully like this in Farsas Castle.

※

One day, Doan and Sylvia were in the lounge surrounded by a number of open books on magic when Tinasha entered, and they looked up.

She was carrying a dozen thin volumes, and an unfamiliar male mage followed after her. He had a pile of books in his arms, too, though his were all thick. He set these tomes down on the desk, and Tinasha smiled. “Thank you, Renart.”

“I’m happy to assist anytime,” Renart replied with a bow. Then he lifted a hand in greeting to Doan. “It’s been a while.”

“You look well,” remarked Doan.

Evidently these two knew each other; Tinasha’s and Sylvia’s eyes widened in surprise. Noticing their curious gazes on him, Doan explained that he had met Renart while studying in Tuldarr. Renart introduced himself to Sylvia.

Once everyone was acquainted, Tinasha began to explain what she had brought.

“…So these books are interpretative texts. I came with this pair because it seemed like they might have some related information.”

The Farsasian mages listened intently, while Renart frowned at the last two volumes. “Princess Tinasha, aren’t those reference texts not meant to be taken out of the library?”

“I left the outer covers behind, so no one will know. We’ll make copies, return them, and all will be well,” she replied.

“That should be fine, then,” Renart said.

Sylvia eyed the calm, good-natured duo with concern. Then her eyes landed on the thin books Tinasha was holding. “Princess Tinasha, what are those?”

“Oh, these are my old diaries,” she answered, setting them down on the table. Each of the ten-odd books had a year inscribed on it. “Oscar asked me to look up a word I recalled hearing somewhere before, but these were the only writings of mine that I could find. I can’t show these to anyone, and there’s a lot to go through, so it won’t be easy, but…”

“What? These are your diaries?” a man piped up from behind as he reached out and picked up one of the things.

Tinasha let out a screech and whirled around. “Oscar! Give that back!”

She grabbed for it, but the king held it out of her reach and opened up the journal. He’d happened to be passing by and heard her voice, so he popped in to see if she wanted to do some practicing.

Despite Tinasha’s efforts, she couldn’t overcome her height disparity with the far taller Oscar. The man scanned the contents and found a neatly written account of war progress, domestic affairs, and the magic spells

Tinasha had been researching at the time. The script used in Tuldarr had a few quirks to it, but most of it was mutually comprehensible and readable.

He flipped ahead and discovered that this diary seemed to detail the war with Tayiri. It was a matter-of-fact report containing nothing about Tinasha's feelings on the matter. Finding that uninteresting, Oscar closed it. At the same time, Tinasha floated up into the air and snatched it. "I told you to give that back!"

"Write something more interesting," Oscar commanded.

"I was busy!" she cried, landing back on the floor and flipping through the diary she had retrieved. Fortunately, there was nothing recorded in it that was too private for other eyes, yet she still felt unsettled.

Oscar eyed the other journals on the desk. "When did you start keeping a diary?"

"Since I was five, I think? It doubled as penmanship practice."

"I want to see *those* diaries," Oscar stated.

"Absolutely not!" Tinasha rebuked, as angry as a cat with its fur standing on end.

Laughing, Oscar patted her head. "Do you keep one now?"

"If I did, it would just be full of insults for you, wouldn't it? Because you're so mean to me all the time."

"Aren't you a bold one…"

"Ow! Ow!" Tinasha yelped, struggling as Oscar pinched her cheeks.

The king of Farsas looked to be enjoying himself deeply, and Renart muttered to Doan, "Is Farsas always like this?"

"Well… Mostly, yes," Doan answered.

Renart was quite taken aback at the sight of Tinasha acting her age, something she never did in Tuldarr, and he kept his irreverent appraisal of the situation to himself.

※

Three days later, a letter arrived from Yarda, a country that bordered Farsas on the east.

Oscar read it in the course of his duties and furrowed his brow. "We've gotten an annoying request from Yarda. Internal strife has broken out, and they want the princess to stay here."

"Princess Nephelli?" asked Lazar.

Farsas had warred with Yarda ten years ago, but after Yarda asked for help rebuilding, Farsas had rendered aid. It was clear they wanted to keep up a good relationship with Farsas; Princess Nephelli, in particular, visited often.

However, she had never stayed long. Oscar had to wonder how dire things had gotten if this had become necessary.

He rested his chin in his hands. "Well, it would be strange to refuse."

“It certainly would. Your Majesty and Princess Nephelli are on friendly terms, after all,” Lazar replied.

Oscar nodded absently, then asked, “But would it be okay with Tinasha here? I can never predict what she’ll do. I don’t want her getting into any scuffles with Yarda.”

“…I believe that’s all dependent on you, Your Majesty,” Lazar stated wryly.

After Tinasha and Delilah’s altercation, the windows in the lounge had cracked. Tinasha had paid for replacements, but this time, her opponent would be a royal. The situation could devolve beyond repair. However, Lazar and all the other attendants and advisers believed that it was Oscar’s fault whenever Tinasha destroyed something.

Whether the young king was aware of his retinue’s concerns or not, he chuckled. “Just in case, I’ll warn Tinasha before she meets Nephelli, whenever that is. Lately she’s been holed up doing analysis, so it might not matter, but it’s not like they’d never run into each other.”

“There’s also the matter of how exactly you break the news to her, Your Majesty. Please take great care…,” pleaded Lazar.

“I’ll tell her while we’re practicing. If we’re outside, it shouldn’t result in any broken panes.”

“That’s not what I meant! I feel sorry for Princess Tinasha!” Lazar cried. Then his face clouded over. “She doesn’t have much time left in Farsas.”

It was so charming to see her clinging to the king like a kitten, but that wouldn’t be the case for much longer. Tinasha’s coronation was fast approaching, and it was clear upon close observation that she and Oscar were staying mindful of their respective positions. Although that was precisely what troubled Lazar.

Oscar gave his friend a strained smile. “I was joking. She’ll handle it well, too. That’s the type of people we are,” he said with a grin, accepting his duty matter-of-factly.

Once Lazar left the study, he let out another sigh.

※

The sky was a beautiful, clear blue as far as the eye could see—perfect weather for a wedding.

In the morning, Sylvia dropped by Tinasha’s room to return some books on magic, all happy smiles. “Today one of my fellow mages is getting married. The ceremony will take place in town, and in the evening, there will be a little reception in the castle courtyard.”

“Oh, a wedding. How nice.”

“Would you like to attend? Everyone would be thrilled.”

“Me?” Tinasha asked, eyeing her scrying bowl with the books still in her hands. The spell configuration floating above the basin was as finely wrought and lovely as ever. She was a bit behind schedule but still making

progress. A change of pace couldn't hurt. "I suppose I'll take you up on your kind offer. Is the mage a man or a woman?"

"A man. His name is Temys," answered Sylvia.

"I see."

After Sylvia departed in high spirits, Tinasha teleported herself to Tuldarr to prepare. She quickly returned to Farsas and worked on her analysis for a little longer. Before she knew it, the time for the reception had come.

While things began at dusk, it was still quite light outside. Tables and chairs were set out in the courtyard, the tables laden with celebratory food and drinks. Oscar had provided all of it for the groom, who was a court mage. Many soldiers and mages were among the guests, and once the happy couple appeared, the modest reception got underway. It started with Chief Mage Kumu greeting the guests.

Tinasha made her appearance just as everyone was beginning to unwind and chat. Clad in the formal mage's robe of Tuldarr, she offered her congratulations to the couple. Then she whispered to the bride, "Are you by any chance a spirit sorcerer?"

"A former one, yes. It's an honor to meet you, princess of Tuldarr," the woman replied.

Her happy smile was infectious, and Tinasha grinned back. She opened the box she was carrying. Inside lay a necklace made of a generous string of pearls. "This is actually a magic implement. One I think is perfect for you. Congratulations."

"Th…thank you so much!" the bride exclaimed, receiving the box from Tinasha's hands. The groom next to her bowed gratefully.

Well wishes complete, Tinasha made to retreat from them when someone got ahold of her from behind. Surprised, she turned her head back and saw a drunken Sylvia clinging to her.

"Princess Tinasha, do something!" pleaded the intoxicated mage.

"Do what?"

"Hey, Sylvia, whoa."

Other people rushed to stop Sylvia from acting improperly, but Tinasha waved them off with a smile. With her friend still plastered to her back, Tinasha puzzled over what to do.

"Hmm, yes. In that case…"

She handed Sylvia off to Kav, then obtained permission from the bridal couple before going to stand before the assembled guests.

Oscar, who was working away with his back to the open window, paused when he heard the faint strains of a song floating in from outside.

He knew this voice well, but he had never heard her sing before. Accompanied only by a lyre, the melody she sang was not one from Farsas. Her clear and resonant voice was beautiful enough to enthrall all who heard it.

Lazar looked up, recognizing the voice, too. “Oh, is that Princess Tinasha?”

“Seems so. I guess she’s making an appearance at the wedding reception? She’s so talented,” Oscar remarked, grinning wryly as he listened to her pleasant, reverberant singing.

His work was almost done. Perhaps he would drop by the reception as well. Deciding to do just that, he sped up his work pace.

By the time Oscar made it to the celebration, the party was in full swing.

After stopping the bride and groom from bowing to him numerous times, Oscar congratulated them. Accepting a drink, he left the pair and searched the courtyard. In one corner, facing away from him, was the woman who had been singing earlier.

She was laughing out loud in amusement as she chatted with Sylvia. But as Oscar got closer, he noticed something was off.

From behind, he got ahold of her wrist. She whirled around, grinning. “Oh? Oscar?”

“You know this is alcoholic, right?” he asked.

“What?” she said, sounding surprised. In the hand Oscar had caught, she was holding a glass of fine wine. He released his grip, and Tinasha brought the glass to her mouth, her head tilted thoughtfully. “But it’s sweet.”

“It’s sweet *and* alcoholic,” Oscar stated.

“Huh…”

It was clear that Tinasha was already drunk. Oscar sat down on her right and kept an eye on her.

Giggling all the while, Tinasha wondered what could be wrong as she drained her glass. She tried to refill it from the carafe on the table, but Oscar stopped her. “Don’t drink any more. Your magic will run amok.”

“Yes, it will. That would be bad.”

“Listen…,” Oscar muttered, holding the carafe itself out of reach. He poured her a glass of water instead. “Drink this.”

“But it’s not sweet…,” Tinasha complained.

“Put sugar in it,” he shot back indifferently, and she pouted.

As Tinasha started to drink her water, Oscar reminded her, “Put on your sealing ornaments. You’re at a party.”

She nodded obediently, set her glass down, and tried to summon the ornaments into her hand. But what appeared instead was a porcelain vase.

Oscar let out a dry huff. “How is that a sealing ornament?”

“Hold on…,” Tinasha said, setting the vase down on the table and trying again. The next thing to appear was a little cat figurine made of stone. Her eyes grew wide. “It’s a cat!”

“Well, that’s obvious!” interjected Sylvia from the opposite side, collapsing into laughter over the table. It looked like she was as inebriated as Tinasha. Doan and Kav stood a fair distance away, watching the two women with fearful eyes but making no moves to get any closer, having apparently decided on a plan of noninvolvement.

Tinasha peered at her hands and moaned, “This is so strange… There’s no sealing ornament.”

“Do more, Princess Tinasha!” called Sylvia.

“Okay,” Tinasha sang, and then a metal helmet and a portion of a suit of armor from who knew where materialized in her hands. Oscar was at his wits’ end. He noticed that her magic must have been affecting the nearby glasses and water pitcher, because they were beginning to float. Tinasha was giving the helmet in her arms a curious look when Oscar plucked it from her and barked, “Don’t use any more magic!”

“Am I doing that…?” she questioned.

“Yes, it’s you,” the young king assured her, placing a sheathed Akashia across her lap. Right away, the levitating glasses landed back on the table. Oscar took Tinasha’s empty glass and filled it with more water.

That was when Lazar came running up from the covered walkway. “Your Majesty, we’ve received an answer from Yarda. The princess will be arriving the day after tomorrow.”

“That was fast,” Oscar replied. For the reply to come so quickly after he sent a response surely meant that Yarda was in dire straits. In any case, welcoming a visiting royal necessitated a fair amount of preparation. Oscar gave Lazar several instructions, remaining calm even as he felt a certain person’s eyes on him.

Once Lazar rushed off, Tinasha asked plaintively, “Oscar, are you getting married?”

Everyone around them froze. Doan casually stood. Aware of his inner circle’s concern, Oscar took a sip from his glass. “Who can say? Why would that be the case?”

“Mrr…,” Tinasha grumbled, pouting and sounding like a small child. Drunk as she was, she could tell from the way Oscar had spoken to Lazar that Nephelli was coming for a long stay.

Oscar pinched her cheek. “What’s with that face? If you’re unhappy about something, just tell me.”

It was all up to Tinasha whether Oscar could get married in the first place. If she didn’t want him marrying someone else, she need only declare herself incapable of breaking the curse. Then she would become the only woman who could bear his child.

As Oscar envisioned that future, Tinasha jerked her head to the side, sulking. “I don’t care. I came to be of use to you. I’m not unhappy about anything, so you should choose whoever you like.”

Despite her claim, Tinasha tried to grab another carafe of wine, but Oscar intercepted. “Fine. I think I’ll take a queen who *won’t* destroy a suit of armor.”

“Wha—?”

Everyone in the vicinity tensed up when they heard the king’s retort. Oscar watched Tinasha out of the corner of his eye, making sure she didn’t drop the sword resting on her lap.

Tinasha glared at him, her eyes glittering like fire. To him, they appeared as two gems. He was about to lose himself entirely in their light when Tinasha flung Akashia away. He reached out an arm to stop it from happening, which she promptly clutched. “Ugh! I hate you!”

“Got it, got it. I despise mages who are annoying drunks, too. You should go sleep it off.”

“I’m not gonna! Stupid!” Tinasha cried, kicking up a fuss even as she clung to Oscar’s arm. However, her eyes kept fluttering shut, suggesting she was almost totally exhausted. Finally, she collapsed onto Oscar’s lap.

Oscar sipped at his drink, letting Tinasha rest peacefully, but when the magic lights in the courtyard twinkled to life, he took that as his cue to lift her up and carry her.

As he took his leave, he said, “I’ll take her to her room. Sorry she caused a commotion.” His advisers and attendants watched them go with uneasy smiles.

Tinasha’s room had a magical barrier instead of a lock, but Oscar could pass through it, as he was the lord of the castle. He carried Tinasha into the room, put her down on the bed, and pulled the covers over her petite frame. Scanning the room, his eyes landed on her diaries lying on the desk.

“She’s surprisingly meticulous…”

The lines from one journal he’d glimpsed earlier were so coolheaded it was difficult to imagine the Tinasha he knew could write them. They very much indicated a queen who stood at the pinnacle of her country at a young age. The writings had also revealed Tinasha’s life to be quite lonely—and that she was constantly dealing with conflicts both domestic and international.

Undoubtedly, the Traditionalists in Tuldarr had never given her a moment’s peace, constantly seeking to oust her. Oscar couldn’t suppress a sigh at the thought of all that pressure weighing on so tiny a body.

“And yet she’s going to become queen again…even though she was finally allowed to abdicate,” Oscar mused, starting to frown, but then he banished that thought. The circumstances were very different now. Her coronation was expressly requested. And she would be a ruler who commanded the mystical spirits, who had not appeared in a long time. Legis would be there to support her as well. Hopefully, Tinasha wouldn’t be so lonely this time.

Oscar eyed the piles of journals, counting them up in his mind. In total, there were fifteen.

“She said it was just before she became queen, so…around when she was thirteen?”

The ninth diary from the oldest had YEAR 235 on the cover; Oscar fell silent before it.

He *did* want to know the truth.

Had he truly been the one to save her when she was young? It hadn’t been someone else?

If it *was* him, then why had he done it?

Perhaps the answer was in those pages.

Thoughts whirled in Oscar’s mind as he touched the cover, but in the end, he didn’t open it.

Looking at it without Tinasha’s permission was wrong. And…even if that *had been* him, it wasn’t his current self. Snooping didn’t seem like it would reveal anything Oscar needed to know. Should there be anything like that, he trusted Tinasha to tell him.

Oscar returned to the bed and sat down on it. He gazed at Tinasha as she slept soundly. “You’re glad you came to meet me, huh?”

Without a doubt, those words had been meant for him, not the previous Oscar. Still, he had to wonder if he could truly give a woman who had crossed four hundred years into the future what she deserved.

Everything she did struck him like waves. Her childish laughter, her deep affection pouring from her even as she raged at him… It was frightening.

Not because it was overwhelming or that Tinasha was too clingy. Oscar was scared because he couldn't allow himself to be a prisoner to love.

Turning back, he eyed the scrying bowl set in the center of the room. There lay the spell configuration she was in the middle of analyzing.

"…If not for this curse…"

If she couldn't break the curse, he could have Tinasha. That was all he needed to justify keeping her.

Oscar did not doubt his ability to talk both Tinasha and Tuldarr into just about anything.

She was a woman out of time, who never should have existed here. Tuldarr would get on without her. What was so wrong with accepting for himself this woman who had come here for him?

After glaring at the spell above the scrying bowl for some time, Oscar glanced over at Tinasha, then back to the spell she was working so hard to decipher. He let out a heavy sigh.

"Maybe this is fate…," he muttered, a bitter note in his voice, as he slid a hand through her hair, catching one glossy lock and carding his fingers through it slowly and lovingly. He shook his head to dispel the emotions rising inside him and then left the room.

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The next day, Tinasha made her way to the training grounds right on time, but she was conspicuously holding a hand to her pounding temple.

Oscar watched her, his eyes narrowed. "Do you have anything to say?"

"My memories are a blur, but first I want to apologize for breaking the suit of armor," she replied.

"…Don't drink any more of Farsas's liquor. You're banned from it."

"Okay…," she agreed lethargically, starting some light stretches and warm-up exercises. As Tinasha bent her knees, she made a face. "The last time I drank, I put a hole in a wall, so I've abstained ever since."

Unbelievable. Compared to that, they got off lucky. Oscar took comfort in that, then picked up his practice sword once he saw Tinasha was ready. "So do you remember the important message I got? If you've forgotten, I'll tell you again."

"I know that Princess Nephelli of Yarda is coming to stay. You don't need to worry. I'll be on my best behavior so I don't bring shame to Legis."

"What about my shame?"

“I don’t care about that,” she huffed, glancing away. Remembering what happened yesterday, Oscar’s eyes narrowed. But if he picked a fight here, the same cycle would just repeat. While he was thinking about how to respond, Tinasha faced him again. “That said, I’ll be away starting this afternoon. If anything happens, contact Tuldarr.”

“Is that where you’re going?”

“No, but I’ll be stopping there, so that will be easiest,” she replied.

Oscar wanted to pry further upon hearing that but was aware he couldn’t meddle in another country’s business. He brought his sword up. “Got it. When you’re back, be sure to greet Nephelli.”

“I will. I do have my work to do,” she said, grinning, but Oscar detected some loneliness in the expression. He felt as though he was glimpsing her queenly demeanor in that smile, the part of her he shouldn’t know about, and he frowned.

“…She’s just a guest of Farsas. You can relax. Like you did at the reception yesterday,” he stated wryly.

“Don’t take advantage of the situation to slip in a snide remark. I’m well aware that I drank too much.”

“But your singing was great.”

The truth was that Oscar had gone to the reception hoping to hear her up close.

Tinasha cocked her head, bemused. “Really? I’ll sing for you anytime. Just ask,” she replied with a happy smile.

※

A handful of men had been loitering in a small tavern in a town not far from the castle city since the afternoon.

An air of degeneracy hung around this drunk, pipe-smoking bunch, but that was common everywhere in these parts. Somewhere along the way, this region had grown saturated with resignation and despondency.

A ray of light suddenly fell on a man who was toying with an empty, upside-down liquor bottle. He squinted.

In the doorway stood a small-statured woman and her male companion. They entered and shut the door, taking seats at a table next to the drunkards. One look at the woman, and they all gasped.

She had lustrous, long hair like black silk and deep inky eyes. She was terrifyingly beautiful, and she winced upon noticing their gazes on her. She turned in her chair to face them. “If it’s all right, I’d like to ask you gentlemen something.”

She wore a bright smile, and the drunkards stared at her, eyeing the woman up and down.

“Renart, don’t you think you went too far?”

“It’s what they deserved,” he replied as he pushed the men, now beaten to a pulp, into a corner of the tavern. This was retribution for how they had tried to abduct Tinasha, giving any excuse they could drum up.

Crouching down next to one man who was still conscious, Tinasha tilted her head to the side. “So can I ask you a question? Do you know what Simila is?”

Simila was the so-called god worshipped by the cult that was operating in the Farsas capital. Tinasha and Renart had come to learn more about it.

The man’s eyes widened, filling with fear. “I—I don’t! I don’t know anything!”

It was obvious he did, and Tinasha pressed him again. “If you talk now, you might end up happier…than if you remain quiet.”

“I’m tellin’ you I don’t know anything!” the man cried.

Tinasha stood and exchanged a glance with Renart. Five taverns they had visited, and each one proved fruitless. They were at a loss.

Giving up on the men who wouldn’t confess no matter how they asked, they took their leave.

“What is going on? I’m positive they all know something,” Tinasha said.

“Where did you hear about Simila in the first place?” Renart inquired.

“From a lady-in-waiting who cared for me when I was little. I believe she was from Cezar.”

Tinasha had scoured her diaries and found the word she was looking for in a passage from when she was six. Then she remembered she had heard the name invoked by that lady-in-waiting. She had told bedtime stories of Simila, describing it as a “*very scary monster deep below*.”

According to her journal, Tinasha had a nightmare about black hands stretching up from a hole in the ground and chasing her.

“I didn’t think it would be this much trouble. I’m supposed to meet Legis soon, so this is quite annoying,” Tinasha grumbled. In an hour, she had to return to Tuldarr for a conference with Legis about her coronation. Unbeknownst to King Calste, after Legis had woken from his magically induced coma, the two of them had held numerous discussions about a certain course of action.

“Perhaps we should go to the capital in Cezar,” Tinasha mused.

“Princess Tinasha, please be aware of how much you stand out,” advised Renart, who thought privately that her beauty was one reason the interrogations hadn’t gone well.

He happened to glance out at the town and noticed an old woman sitting under the eaves of a house. Motioning to Tinasha not to follow, he went over to the woman alone and crouched down on one knee before her. “Excuse me, I’d like to ask you about something…”

After several attempts to persuade her, the old woman reluctantly began to talk. She finally gave them the information they were looking for.

And once they’d heard the full story, Renart and Tinasha stared at each other in shock.

※

Two days after Nephelli sent word to Farsas, she arrived via transportation array.

As far as royal visits went, this one was rather hasty but couldn't be otherwise given the circumstances. She brought with her three military officers, two mages, and two ladies-in-waiting. Oscar was there to formally receive Nephelli, and she gave him an official letter from her father, the king of Yarda. It read, *My prime minister Zisis is attempting to oust the crown prince, Savas.*

While they had no definitive evidence, the king and the prince were aware he was behaving suspiciously and had decided that Nephelli should go elsewhere until things calmed down, just in case.

She looked worried indeed, and Oscar smiled at her. They had seen each other regularly since they were children, but now that she was nineteen, she was maturing into an adult woman still possessed of sweet, youthful beauty.

"I imagine it won't be easy being in an unfamiliar country, but I hope you have a relaxing stay here," Oscar said.

"I regret that this is all so sudden. I'm presuming upon your kindness," Nephelli replied, curtsying as her pale-pink cheeks reddened.

Oscar left the great hall with her to show the visiting princess to the room where she would be staying. Both of their guard escorts trailed behind them.

Tinasha had come to Farsas alone, insisting she could handle herself, but normally a royal traveled with protectors and servants, as Nephelli did. When Oscar said as much to Tinasha before, she had shocked him by revealing there had been a period of time when she cooked her own meals, too.

Tinasha had left for Tuldarr the day before. With less than a month until her coronation ceremony, there was much to arrange.

Nephelli looked all around the hallway as she and Oscar walked. Then she asked timidly, "The princess of Tuldarr is here, too, I believe…?"

"Yes, although she comes and goes like a phantom. Once she's back, I'll have her come greet you," Oscar replied.

"Prince Legis introduced us once, here in Farsas. She's very beautiful," said Nephelli.

That would have been at Oscar's coronation. He winced at the worry and jealousy in Nephelli's eyes. "She's rather unpredictable. Her personality is so intense that her appearance doesn't really matter."

A damning appraisal. Nephelli, unsure if Oscar was serious, hesitated before merely offering him a vague smile.

※

Upon Tinasha's return to Farsas around sunset, she was informed that there was to be a banquet for Nephelli that evening. This was relayed by Sylvia, who stood happily in front of the door to Tinasha's quarters with a makeup kit and gown bag.

Holding a heavy stack of books from Tuldarr, Tinasha balked, and her face went stiff. "What…? I have to wear makeup?"

"Of course you do! And you have to wear a gown as well!" insisted Sylvia.

"Urgh… I should have come back a day later…" Tinasha groaned, but she let Sylvia enter.

Right away, she hung the gown on the wall and said excitedly, "There's no way anyone can beat you when you make an effort, so get serious!"

"Who am I supposed to be fighting with…?" Tinasha muttered in a worn-out voice, drawing a bath as she juggled a stack of papers in her other hand.

"Princess Nephelli, of course!" Sylvia exclaimed.

"Over what?!"

"I want His Majesty to make *you* his queen."

"What?!" Tinasha shrieked, so caught off guard by Sylvia's crazy proclamation that she almost dropped the collection of documents into the bathtub. Hastily, she clutched them tight against her chest. "Th-that would be difficult from both a public and a private standpoint…"

"Really?"

"I mean, I'm going to become queen of Tuldarr soon…," reminded Tinasha.

"That doesn't matter! Tuldarr is right next to Farsas, so all you have to do is draw a transportation array. Birth two heirs, and you'll be fine!"

"…"

Tinasha felt so exhausted that she couldn't respond immediately. She went to set the papers down so as not to drop them.

While an extreme case, what Sylvia proposed wasn't strictly impossible.

Still, but no king or queen had ever attempted it before. Two countries ruled by people who had the same parents would only spell trouble.

However, Tinasha had a reason why that would not be a vital concern for her. While it was not her explicit goal, that roadblock would cease to matter along the way.

The true problem was something else.

"Oscar doesn't see me that way at all."

"What?" Sylvia evidently found that claim unbelievable.

Tinasha shrugged. "At most, he doesn't hate me. He treats me exactly like a kid, so there's no way he would marry me. That much is obvious, even to me."

Tinasha pushed past a wide-eyed Sylvia to go check on the bath. The water was ready, so she added some perfumed oils to it and slipped out of

her clothes. She sank into the tub, soaking as she stretched her slender limbs.

Sylvia entered before long and started to wash Tinasha's long hair. As the floral scent of the oils permeated the bathroom, Tinasha felt her built-up exhaustion melt away.

While she was always juggling multiple things at once, there were times when she was allowed a reprieve. Now was one of those occasions.

At times, the many responsibilities she handled felt hopeless, even if she knew they were not. Undoubtedly, they took their toll on the young woman's body. The hot water of the bath and Sylvia's hands cleaning her locks felt very nice.

Eyes closed, Tinasha pressed on various pressure points on her face. Done washing her hair, Sylvia frowned at Tinasha's pale body in the tub. "You're covered in bruises."

"Ah yes, because of sword practice. I can't heal bruises… Although, I can disguise their appearance," Tinasha explained.

"Why are you learning sword fighting? You're already very strong," said Sylvia.

"When things happen suddenly, my reactions are slow. There's someone out there who will come to kill me if I don't improve."

"What sort of crazy daredevil would that be…?" Sylvia wondered in a hushed tone.

That would be the demon king, but Tinasha only answered with a vague smile. The two continued to chat throughout the rest of Tinasha's soak, and when she was done, she climbed out of the tub.

With Tinasha's bruises concealed, her whole body was white as snow, and though she was a bit too thin, her alluring curves beguiled any who beheld them. Sylvia caught herself staring at Tinasha's naked form until she snapped back to her senses and flashed her a confident expression. "About what we were discussing earlier—a man doesn't gift clothes to a woman he doesn't care about! Especially not our king!"

With that, Sylvia disappeared back into Tinasha's bedroom and retrieved the gown the king of Farsas had commissioned specifically for Tinasha, throwing her stunned friend a sidelong glance as she did.

With the moon rising into the sky, the banquet got underway.

Dozens of high officials and nobles who served the castle milled about the banquet hall. Nephelli was relieved to receive such a warm welcome. Up until now, every day at court in her home country was tense and nerve-racking. Though it was only for a moment, she was honestly happy to have landed in a safe place.

Still, she worried for her father and brother who remained in Yarda. Her father was already quite old, and her brother could be fainthearted. She couldn't help feeling anxious over whether the two of them could resolve the situation alone.

If I married into Farsas and gained its support, could I save my father and brother…?

Nephelli looked to the king of Farsas next to her with that question on her mind. He noticed her gaze and opened his mouth to say something.

But just then, the crowd around the entrance to the hall began to buzz. Nephelli and Oscar glanced over, puzzled, and saw the woman who would rule Tuldarr standing in the doorway.

Tinasha hid her discomfort at being the center of attention. She had reminded Sylvia again and again that Nephelli was the guest of honor, so she would prefer to blend in more, but her friend had evidently not listened at all.

However, even if Sylvia had paid attention to that exhortation, she would have only insisted Tinasha be more aware of her own striking appearance. As requested, Sylvia had only applied light makeup in subdued colors. Yet Tinasha's radiance was so distinctive and rare that it garnered everyone's attention.

Her navy-blue gown, so dark it seemed almost black, was entirely open at the back. Layers and layers of light, airy fabrics billowed outward from her waist down to the floor. She wore few accessories, but that only enhanced the innate elegance of the woman's form.

Tinasha approached Nephelli in her seat of honor at the front and curtsied before her. "I apologize for my silence since we first made our acquaintanceship. It is an honor to meet you again."

Nephelli, who had been in a daze, fascinated by Tinasha's appearance, leaped to her feet and returned the curtsy. "I must apologize, too, for my sudden appearance. I hope we shall get along here."

"There is nothing to apologize for. I find myself quite busy as my coronation approaches, so you will have to forgive any impoliteness," Tinasha said with a bright smile as she rose to her feet. She attempted to bow and retreat, keeping a sociable, soft smile on her lips, but Oscar called to her.

"That looks good on you."

"Fortunately, yes. Thank you," she replied, her facade never fading once, and withdrew. Tinasha spent some time by the wall chatting with Meredina, who was there as security, before excusing herself from the hall.

Nephelli watched her go, cutting a vivid picture even as she left, and couldn't hold back a sigh. She couldn't believe that such a woman existed, even though she had met her personally. Feeling as if the light cast by her utterly charming existence was too much for her, Nephelli averted her eyes downward.

She did not want to look over and see what kind of expression the man next to her wore as he watched Tinasha go.

※

Late at night in his bedroom, Oscar lay facedown on his bed, still dressed from the party. He managed to stay awake, though he was on the verge of passing out.

Nark was asleep by his pillow, curled into a ball. The dragon slept most of the time, unless it was needed. Sometimes he wouldn't find it in his room, but it would come back if he called for it, so he never worried. Idly, he reached out for Nark's tail but froze when he heard a knock at the door.

Calling out to see who it was, a most unexpected woman's voice came back.

"What, this time you came by the front door?" Oscar asked, inviting her in.

Tinasha gave a shrug of her bare shoulders. "I wouldn't want to intrude if you had brought the princess back to your room, so I checked with the guards first before knocking."

"What kind of beast do you think I am…?"

"Figure it out," Tinasha flatly. Nark perked up at the sound of her voice. The little dragon flapped its wings and flew happily over to its former master, landing on her shoulder. She giggled and stroked its throat.

This was not a dragon that was friendly to all humans, but it was fond of Oscar and Tinasha and tolerated a few others like Als and Doan. Tinasha made her way over to the table, playing with Nark as she walked, and started to feed it the fruit arranged there.

Oscar watched her, his eyes half lidded. A splash of moonlight poured onto her ivory back, giving it a brilliant shine. "You're still wearing that dress?"

"Well, you had it made for me. Is it so strange?"

"No…," the king muttered. The trouble was that it looked much too good on her. While Oscar was the one who had ordered it, the gown drew out and enhanced Tinasha's charm beautifully.

Tinasha winced as she pushed a round apple into Nark's mouth. "The back is open, so I can't quite relax in it."

"I made it that way because you've been so hot lately," Oscar explained.

"You could have just shortened the skirt, then."

"Then you'd look like a kid," he countered. Tinasha was always whining about how hot it was and wearing sleeveless outfits with short hems, but she was so blasé about it that it always appeared childish. The future queen was much more alluring when she wore a gown like she was now.

Deliberately putting space between them, Oscar sat down on his bed. Eyeing the sheaf of papers in her hands, he asked, "So why are you here?"

"I've got bad news and bad news. Which one do you want to hear first?"

"…"

"I'm kidding. There's only one thing," Tinasha said, showing Oscar a document as he sighed exasperatedly. "It's about Simila. I've finally learned what it is. Simila is an evil god spoken of in Cezar since ancient times."

"What…?"

“Yes, I’m not surprised you’d react that way. The oldest accounts tell of a town close to the eastern border of Cezar that worshipped this god, five hundred years ago. For the following two centuries, it expanded into a religious group, culminating in the sect founder acting as the king’s adviser. This led to many human sacrifices and wrongful executions of the innocent. This is all only spoken of by word of mouth, and no one wants to discuss it, so obtaining this information was not easy.”

“*You* went to go question people?!”

“Yes. I kept getting into scuffles wherever I went, so Renart told me to leave,” Tinasha admitted with a sniff.

Oscar could well understand Renart’s feelings, and he let out a sigh. Someone of moderate beauty would be perfect for drawing out information, but Tinasha’s exquisite looks would only garner undue attention and lead to extra trouble.

However, the problem now lay elsewhere. Oscar pondered the twists and turns of this story. “So what you’re saying is: Believers of this evil god have come to Farsas.”

“It appears so. It’s highly likely that this cult has taken control of the Cezar royal court. Almost all of Simila’s faithful suddenly vanished five years ago, but that’s also when the political situation in Cezar went haywire. Mages flocked to the castle, and all the magistrates were replaced. More and more people were drafted as soldiers yet were never heard from again. There’s also been strange disappearances. Cezar’s situation is rough, to say the least, and morale couldn’t be lower.”

“And this decline was brought about by the religion? What are they even doing?” Oscar wondered aloud. He didn’t think worship and politics should excessively intermingle, especially when the object of reverence was a wicked deity. A nation falling to ruin over something like that was the height of foolishness.

Tinasha came up to Oscar and held out the stack of documents. “I’ve summarized all the details here. If there’s anything you want to examine, please do.”

“Thanks, that’s a big help. Sorry for the trouble,” Oscar replied, accepting the papers.

“It’s fine. Sorry I didn’t have better news,” Tinasha said, flashing him a slightly bitter smile, one quite different from her public expression.

“How’s the analysis going?”

“I’m stuck, but I’ll be done once I overcome this block. Just wait a little while longer,” she responded, pulling at her bun. Her hair came undone, cascading down.

As a curtain of black silk fell over Tinasha’s shoulders and back, Oscar closed his eyes for fear of how utterly bewitching it was. “If you can’t manage it, don’t worry.”

There was a short pause. Before the silence grew uncomfortable, Tinasha replied, “I’m fine. If things go well, I’ll break it while I’m still in Farsas. I just need a flash of inspiration.”

Her voice was as clear as still waters. Hearing it reminded Oscar that Tinasha was indeed the ruler of a country, exactly like he was. Mild loneliness was something she was proud to accept as a natural consequence. Personal feelings or hesitation weren’t reason enough to cease. She understood that doing what duty demanded was her responsibility.

Thus, the more placid Tinasha conducted herself outwardly, the more aware Oscar became that the time for the two to part was fast approaching. Even as an uneasy irritation racked Oscar, he maintained his composure, too.

He opened his eyes to find her staring at him with concern. A pale hand touched his cheek. “Are you feeling all right? You look tired.”

“I’m fine,” Oscar assured. The warmth from Tinasha’s soft hand seeped through to his whole body.

The king felt lonelier with her than he did when alone, most likely because the two of them were on separate paths.

A serenity came over Tinasha’s face, backlit by the moon. She regretted nothing—accepted everything as it was. Loneliness was only natural.

Perhaps that was why Oscar desired to take her into his arms so powerfully at that moment.

He wanted to feel her body heat and make sure that her solitude was something she had chosen herself.

Tinasha gazed anxiously into Oscar’s eyes, which held some formless emotion in them. Suddenly, a serious glint appeared in her dark orbs. She took his face gently into her hands and then pressed a kiss to his eyelid.

Left astonished by the softness of her lips, Oscar felt a jolt of something run through him at her kiss.

He desperately wanted to embrace her. He wanted to kiss her deeply and teach her all about carnal desire. He wanted to take control.

Yet the king suppressed those terrifyingly primal, fierce instincts and glared up at the woman, his lips pinched. “What are you doing?”

“I felt this odd pull that I couldn’t resist. Sorry,” Tinasha said without an ounce of shame, gently releasing Oscar. Her breezy answer gave him a headache.

She truly was no better than a child at times. Tinasha simply followed her heart without considering what could come next.

As Oscar rubbed at his temples, Nark hopped onto his lap. Tinasha stroked along the creature’s back.

“Good night, then,” she bid him, giggling impishly, as if oblivious to her own actions.

Oscar eyed her fragile body coldly. “Come during the day next time.”

Despite his request, it seemed unlikely that Tinasha would glean the meaning of his deeply exhausted words.

※

After the banquet on her first day, Nephelli did not see Tinasha at all.

It was not that she went out of her way to avoid the other royal, rather, Tinasha simply never seemed to be around. When Nephelli asked a mage of Farsas about it, he winced and informed her that Tinasha rarely left her room lately.

“If you’re curious, you can go take a look at the training grounds. She might be there,” he said.

Nephelli wasn’t curious, exactly. Still, she found herself doing as the mage had suggested and often strolled along the walkway that led to the training grounds.

On her tenth day in Farsas, Nephelli found Tinasha there, practicing with a sword. Her opponent was the king of Farsas, and Nephelli took in this unexpected scene with wide eyes.

The sounds of weapons clashing were soft, as if he was matching his strength to hers, but they came at a swift pace.

With a curt exhale, Oscar knocked Tinasha’s sword into the air. Nephelli gasped as the weapon spun overhead. Astonishingly, Tinasha teleported the armament back into her grip before its blade plunged into the ground.

Oscar eyed his adversary with some frustration. “Your physical movements haven’t caught up with your awareness. You need to move more instinctively,” he advised.

“I’ll do my best.”

“You can read what your opponent will do next from their shoulders. But take in the whole picture, too,” instructed Oscar.

Tinasha nodded obediently, then glanced down at her right arm. A reddish-brown bruise was blooming near the shoulder, the result of a blow she had failed to deflect. With a touch from her hand, Tinasha caused it to vanish.

Impressed, Oscar remarked, “That’s handy.”

“I only concealed the appearance. Magic can’t heal bruises,” Tinasha explained, using a cloth to wipe her sweat-slicked sword hilt. Then she grabbed ahold of it again, looked up, and tilted her head to one side in confusion.

Oscar looked thunderstruck. Not knowing why, she tilted her head the other way.

“You, you… Why didn’t you tell me that sooner?! Your body must be covered in bruises!” he exclaimed.

“It is, but they don’t hurt. I can mend the internal part,” Tinasha coolly replied.

“That’s not the problem.”

“What? It’s the same thing as blending makeup into your skin. And I don’t expect to get better without some pain along the way. So please, let’s keep going,” the young woman insisted.

“I feel pretty depressed right about now,” Oscar muttered.

“Why?” Tinasha questioned with irritation, even as she readied her sword. She slashed down at Oscar, not waiting for his acknowledgment.

He parried it quite easily, however. The pair then exchanged another twenty or so moves.

Oscar didn’t miss Tinasha’s movements slowing when he handily fended away her blade, and he took a step in and sent her weapon flying. He drove his sword in toward Tinasha’s neck, now undefended.

Immediately, she threw up her left arm and caught the blow, leaping back. “O-ow.”

“Use your magic!” Oscar snapped at Tinasha irritably. His intention had never been to actually stab her throat, but she had countered on instinct and wound up injured for it. The response had likely been fostered in past life-or-death conflicts. Prioritizing survival, even if it meant certain sacrifices, was a concept that had been ingrained into Tinasha over the years.

Still gripping her sword, she pressed a hand to her left arm. “You still ended up hitting me.”

“You won’t progress without some pain along the way, right? If you don’t like it, use magic to defend yourself.”

“No. That would be cheating,” she dismissed primly.

Oscar thought that an unbelievably stubborn response. He wished to know who raised this obstinate creature.

With an annoyed click of his tongue, Oscar stepped back. Then he felt a gaze upon him and looked to see Nephelli standing close by, accompanied by two guards.

When he caught sight of her concerned expression, he winced and waved her over. Hesitantly, she sauntered onto the training grounds from the end of the covered walkway.

Tinasha noticed her, too, and grinned. “Hello. Out for a walk?”

Nephelli was taken aback by this innocent smile so unlike the one Tinasha had worn during the welcome banquet, but she hid her surprise and bobbed her head respectfully. “Yes… I wanted to stretch my legs a little. Princess Tinasha, whatever are you doing?”

“Training. I have a lot of free time right now,” she replied, her eyes narrowing with her smile. The expression betrayed no emotion. Curiously, Nephelli felt a sense of uneasiness sweep over her. She was a royal, too, and had learned some swordplay as self-defense. Although she kept up regular practice, she had never undergone such intense drills. Oscar and Tinasha were both rulers and yet seemed to believe it a matter of course that they fight in the thick of combat. It was frightening.

Unaware that Nephelli was trembling with fear, Oscar asked Tinasha, “Is it okay that you’re still in Farsas? You’ve got preparations to do for your coronation, don’t you?”

“Legis is handling them for me. I tried to handle things myself, but the castle staff wrested responsibility from me when I slashed the guest list. Don’t worry; I’m doing my job properly.”

That was probably true. Outside of sword practice, Oscar hadn’t seen Tinasha out and about much recently. At times, he detected exhaustion written all over her face. Secretly, he was worried.

Tinasha checked the clock on the outer wall and bowed her head. “Is it about time? Thank you for practicing with me.”

“Hurry up and do something to prevent all that bruising,” Oscar instructed.

“I’ll handle it,” Tinasha replied. Evidently planning to stay, she had just taken Oscar’s sword from him when she stared in the direction of the walkway. Oscar turned around, following her gaze. There stood Nephelli’s guards, a military officer and a mage.

“What is it…?” Oscar inquired. Tinasha looked like a cat sniffing out an unfamiliar human. Unsure of the issue, Oscar made to leave, urging Nephelli along. But immediately after, he whipped around. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Tinasha lifting her hands up as she whispered an incantation.

Once he’d made sure of that, he picked up Nephelli. Everything happened so swiftly that there wasn’t time for the Yardan princess to feel discombobulated before a sound like nails scratching on a chalkboard raked the air.

“Scatter.”

With that one word from Tinasha’s lips, the awful noise stopped. Keeping Nephelli in his arms, Oscar asked, “Where did that come from?”

“Wait. Mila!” Tinasha called.

“Mm-hmm, here I am! What do you need?” answered a red-haired girl who popped out of thin air.

Tinasha gave her spirit orders. “Go after the assassin. I want them alive, but if that’s not possible, kill them.”

“Got it, got it!” the girl trilled, letting out a laugh like tinkling bells as she disappeared.

With the spirit gone, Oscar finally set Nephelli down. Pressing her hands to her reddened cheeks, she gazed up at Oscar. “Um, so…what just happened?”

“Ah well… An assassin broke through the castle wards. Looks like they’ve already escaped, but it’d be best to return inside,” he said.

The blood drained from Nephelli’s face. She glanced over at her guard soldier and mage to check their reactions. Oscar smiled awkwardly down at the woman, whose lower lip was trembling. “Well, we don’t know who or what their target was. Could’ve been the explosives behind us.”

“If they think that’s enough to kill me, they’re stupider than I thought. That’s what they get for being so unaware,” Tinasha stated with a shrug, walking over to return the sword Oscar was using to him.

Nothing could reassure Nephelli in the slightest—not the sight of Tinasha looking as composed as if nothing had transpired, nor the equally unperturbed Oscar putting a hand around Nephelli’s shoulders.

※

After leaving the training grounds, Tinasha retired to the castle’s grand bath, diving into the water and splashing about while washing off her sweat. This had become her custom ever since her plunge in the underground Lake of Silence. Oscar had told Tinasha to learn how to swim, and while she was trying, she had yet to succeed.

As Tinasha sat submerged in the water, she heard her spirit’s voice right above her head and stood, brushing water off her face with her hands. Mila was floating overhead. “Lady Tinasha, you can’t breathe while swimming?”

“I don’t know how. Do you?”

“Demons don’t swim, so no. More importantly, I caught the assassin. Should I send them here?”

“That’s fine, but I *am* still naked,” Tinasha reminded, squeezing water out of her ponytail and walking over to the shower area. She summoned clothes into her hands. As she was pulling on a pale-blue sundress, a man she didn’t recognize appeared on the floor before her. He seemed to be a mage, and there were cuts covering his body. After arriving, he wriggled around on the floor, looking every which way.

Tinasha arched an eyebrow as she beheld the sight. “Welcome. Sorry we’re meeting here of all places, but I need to ask you some questions.”

When the man looked up, he saw an extremely beautiful and cruel smile on the woman’s lips.

Oscar, who had returned to his study after escorting Nephelli back to her rooms, gave a strained smile to Tinasha and Als when they entered. Eyeing the bound, battered man, the king asked Tinasha, “What did you find out?”

“His target was, in fact, Princess Nephelli. He’s an assassin from Yarda. However, he worked through an intermediary, so he’s oblivious to the one who gave the order. He’s just a hired man,” Tinasha reported, eyes flitting over to the hired killer as she crossed her arms and leaned against the table.

Sweat was pouring down the nervous man’s temples; his magic had been sealed off.

Oscar gazed at him with his head in one hand, as if he could hardly be bothered with this. “An assailant breaking through our wards is concerning.”

“Mmm, I think he just knew what was going on inside. An external entity can’t plow through a magical barrier without permission, but you *can* be let in on foot.”

“Got it. Als, make him talk.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Als responded with a bow, then dragged the assassin out of the room.

What Tinasha was implying was that there was a traitor in the castle. Oscar doubted whether this hired assassin would expose the turncoat’s identity, but it was worth trying.

Oscar lifted his chin off his hand and leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs. “Damn nuisance. Even if he tells us he was hired by Yarda’s prime minister or something, I can’t do a thing about it.”

“You can’t?”

“It’s another country’s affairs. All I can do is inform Yarda,” he answered with a sigh, twirling a pen in his hands as he stared at the ceiling. Tinasha asked Oscar if he wanted tea, and he said yes. The king smiled, feeling as if it had been a very long time since he’d watched her brew tea. Tinasha opened the door and asked the lady-in-waiting beyond for some water, then turned back to face him.

“Oh, but couldn’t you get involved if you got engaged to her?” Tinasha proposed airily.

Oscar’s eyes widened. More surprising than the suggestion itself was the fact that it came from Tinasha. Careful not to let his inner feelings show, Oscar replied, “Get engaged to someone just for that? That’s a big ask.”

“So cold… Do you not think her a suitable candidate?” Tinasha pressed.

The inquiry was not without merit. Yarda, Farsas’s neighbor to the east, had enjoyed a friendly relationship with Farsas in the ten years since the countries warred. If the two nations joined in marriage, relations would be stabilized for quite a while.

However, Yarda wasn’t the only country looking to make a match with Farsas. After all, it was one of the most powerful nations in all the land, rivaled only by Tuldarr and Cezar.

Neither was inclined to seek a marriage alliance with Farsas, though. Cezar, because of its many years of strained relations with Farsas, and Tuldarr, because the peculiar Magic Empire kept to itself.

Glancing over at the woman who would become queen of Tuldarr in twenty short days, Oscar watched her reach out to take a pitcher of water from the lady-in-waiting.

While the air Tinasha had about her typically was anything but regal, she actually kept a rational, levelheaded disposition as a queen. Her suggestion to wed Nephelli was evidence of that.

As she began to pour the water she had heated with magic into the teapot, she said in a crisp voice, “If you become engaged to her, you will have ample justification for interfering in Yardan affairs. It would put her at

ease, too… I suspect her intention in coming here had something to do with that anyway."

Oscar almost nodded but then frowned. "Perhaps that was Yarda's plan in sending her here. If she dies at home, then any hope of aid from Farsas vanishes."

"Oh, I see… But if she perishes here, you become obligated to assist," Tinasha surmised.

"Dammit. How much longer is this going to drag on?"

"Until things in Yarda reach a conclusion, I imagine. And we don't know how long that will take," Tinasha stated, keeping an intent gaze fixed on the teapot as she shook it to steam the tea leaves. Her focus likely had nothing to do with Yarda's problems; she was determined to make tea.

To Tinasha, Yarda's predicament was a neighbor's neighbor's problem. She was even further from it than Oscar. Whether she had an opinion on the matter or not, she possessed no desire or ability to intervene. Such was perfectly normal for a queen of Tuldarr.

Glancing over at her lovely face in profile, Oscar remembered something. "Oh yeah, you were staring hard at Nephelli's guards earlier. Did you find them suspicious or something?"

"What? You saw that? No, that wasn't why. I was just startled by how much magic her mage has."

"Mage?" Oscar repeated, trying to recall his face but failing. The fellow hadn't made a strong impression.

Tinasha looked guilty. "He's suppressing his power, but there's nothing wrong with a royal guard doing that. He's probably stronger than the mages Princess Nephelli keeps as her closest associates. So I was just wondering if he'd want to come to Tuldarr; that's all."

"Don't try to poach other countries' mages so casually."

"I didn't say anything to him!" Tinasha shouted indignantly, then put a soft smile back on her face. "Setting any poaching aside, I'll take on anything I can help with. You need only to ask."

"Thanks. I do want to get this sorted out while you're still around."

"By the way, my analysis should take another two weeks. I'm currently waiting on a magic implement," Tinasha calmly revealed.

Oscar's eyes widened, reality hitting him all of a sudden that the curse shackling him for fifteen years would soon be lifted. It felt like a fantasy. He should be glad to get rid of it. But at the same time, it meant losing his connection to her.

A little while later, Tinasha placed a steaming teacup on the desk before Oscar. He glanced up at her. Impulsively, he blurted out, "It's not going to fall through?"

"Don't *say* that!" she cried, making a terrible face at him.

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“It fell through, hmm? That tramp failed.” Zisis sighed in disappointment upon receiving the report.

Nephelli staying in Farsas had troubled him at first, but now he focused his efforts on using that against the royal faction. If she died in Farsas, no one would blame him for it as long as his link to the assassin remained unknown. This would allow him to take advantage of the opening left by her death.

The king and Savas were aware of Zisis’s shady maneuvers, but without proof, they could only stand and watch.

Zisis found it irritating that their power was that limited. Perhaps he should have delighted in his enemy’s ineptitude, but that adversary was the royal family of his homeland. Had they enough power of their own, he never would have had to do all this. Zisis’s face twisted bitterly with a mix of frustration and patriotism.

Regardless, he had to do something about Nephelli. She had known the king of Farsas since they were children. It would spell trouble for him if they were to get engaged. Unlike the former king of Farsas, who had provided aid to Yarda, the young man on the throne now was shrewd. It was Zisis’s secret fear that he would annex Yarda through marriage with Nephelli.

“…It is imperative that I deal with the princess.”

Zisis faltered at the idea of murdering her, but she was the one who abandoned her duty and fled to another country. As he told himself that, he gave new instructions to make his next move.

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Three days after the assassin incident, Als delivered a report to Oscar. Evidently, the hired killer had received instructions via the intermediary about how to infiltrate the castle. He had gone through the eastern gate, which was regularly guarded but had been left momentarily vulnerable upon the outbreak of a small fire.

“So someone let him in. Who do you think it was?” asked Oscar.

“For now, I suspect one of the people who came with the princess, because after what happened before, we thoroughly investigated everyone working in the castle,” answered Als, referring to how the religious cult had plotted Tinasha’s poisoning and sent a woman to break into the treasure vault. After arresting those involved, Oscar had ordered the leaders of the cult all executed, and the lower-ranking members of the organization were sent home under close supervision. At that time, every person working for the castle became a subject of investigation into whether they had ties to any suspicious people.

Oscar pressed the back of his pen against his forehead. “How much should I get involved in this…? For the time being, be wary of anyone from

Yarda. Once I've decided on a method of approach, I'll send further instructions."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Als replied, retreating from the room.

An unhappy mood settled over Oscar, and his gaze fell onto the papers on his desk. He recalled how Tinasha had acted earlier.

He'd imagined her the jealous type, but she was oddly composed, which was troubling. The night they came back from the Lake of Silence, she had told him that their current relationship was enough. Had she truly given up on her attachment to him already? Putting aside the time when she was drunk, Tinasha's reaction had been entirely different when speaking to Delilah. Maybe the situation had been different then, Delilah being who she was.

Oscar had led Tinasha to believe he held no interest in her, and the man understood he had no right to be upset. Even so, vague irritation flickered through his mind as he gathered together all the documents he didn't need and dumped them on Lazar, who had just entered.

At the same time, the seemingly unenvious Tinasha was in her room floating upside down. In a reversal of their usual positions, her spirit was sitting in a chair gazing up at her master. There was an appalled look on her face.

"If it bothers you that much, why don't you just kill her?"

"I'm not going to kill her!"

The topic of discussion was the recently targeted princess of Yarda.

Annoyed, Tinasha gazed at her hands. She had a sealing ring on every finger.

It wasn't her place to step in. Therefore, she had given the most logical-sounding opinion.

Yet Tinasha was hopelessly distressed over the idea of Oscar deepening his connection with Nephelli beyond mere diplomatic friendship. She could have admitted to not liking it, but doing so risked forfeiting all ability to keep herself in check. Thus, she was trying very hard *not* to think about it.

Her magic was still fluctuating in reaction to her emotions, however. After putting up a barrier around the windowpanes that strained under the pressure, Tinasha set herself rotating in midair.

That was when a man's voice entreated, "Oh, kill her, kill her. It's so much easier to be wicked."

"Travis?!" Tinasha yelped, hastily righting herself.

At the table, Mila recoiled in shock. There he was in the seat across from her, having appeared at some point.

"What are you doing here…?" asked Tinasha somewhat nervously.

Mila bowed formally to Travis; he responded with a casual wave. "I had some free time, so I came to tease you. It's so fun how you keep making one rival after another."

"She's not my rival… It has nothing to do with me," Tinasha declared sulkily.

Travis's eyes danced as he watched her like one would an amusing toy. He spread his arms wide, acting grand. "The prince of Yarda is so weakhearted. I think you'd see eye to eye much more with the prime minster."

"Really?"

"Yes, that prime minister is a sly one. Once he realized the prince had no aptitude for royal duties or judging character, he turned on him. He'll sacrifice one for the good of many and do whatever it takes to settle things quickly. Quite gallant, don't you think?" said Travis.

It was an open compliment, but coming from the mouth of the demon king, it was impossible to interpret as an honest one. Tinasha landed on the floor and leaned against an empty chair, a sour look on her face. "How do you know all that?"

"Because I've been in Gandona. I keep tabs on the neighboring countries," he replied.

Gandona was a Great Nation to the east that shared a border with Farsas and Yarda. It was not that surprising to learn that Travis was there, though it was unsettling to hear him use such a human turn of phrase.

Suspicious, Tinasha asked, "You're keeping tabs on them? For what purpose? Other countries shouldn't have anything to do with you."

"Oh, but they do. I'm the guardian of an heir to the throne," Travis idly admitted.

"What?!"

"Eh, you'll find out soon enough. Eventually, I'm going to take the country and give it to my girl."

Tinasha didn't understand what he meant by that at all.

It was clear that Travis was meddling in Gandona's affairs on behalf of someone he'd taken a fancy to. This was unprecedented, not to mention terrifying. "What are you going to do once you've taken the country…?"

"Who knows? I haven't decided yet. Although I won't do anything to your country, as a favor to Leonora."

"Was that not balanced out by the debt I incurred when I lost to you?" Tinasha inquired.

"I've lent you your life, which I will take back someday. This is a separate matter," replied Travis with a cocky grin.

Tinasha was gratified and yet also not. The demon king said he wouldn't do anything to her country, but Farsas lay between Gandona and Tuldarr. Farsas was the one more in danger, so that was the one she didn't want him touching.

Saying as much would only invite unwanted interest from Travis, considering how much enjoyment he got out of doing things people hated.

A smile spread across his lips, as if he saw right through her concerns. "So? Do you want to kill her now?"

"No!"

If Tinasha did give in to that temptation, she would undoubtedly become the strongest assassin ever. Unsurprisingly, she grimaced and refused to.

Travis snorted, as if he thought that was no fun. “You have so much power. Haven’t you ever wanted to make better use of it? It’s so boring how you only play the defensive.”

“Power is just one part of a person. I don’t want to be controlled by that single portion,” she countered.

“What’s so bad about exploring what you have? Don’t you want him?”

“You don’t win a person’s heart by killing another,” Tinasha returned, a blank look on her face.

That was a simple fact. Even if she slew a woman Oscar loved, that didn’t mean he would love her. It would only lead to the opposite.

Travis frowned. He opened his mouth to say something but kept silent. Tinasha glanced over at him, wondering about his sudden silence, and found him giving a sardonic smile. “Well, whatever. More importantly, a pesky insect has gotten into your castle. Have you noticed?”

“Do you mean the assassin? I feel awful for the princess of Yarda.”

“Not him. Another insect.”

“What?” asked Tinasha, brow furrowed. If someone else besides the assassin had stolen in, she couldn’t overlook it.

Travis smirked, clearly satisfied with himself. “Do your very best. Trust too much in your own power, and you’ll get tripped up all too easily. That’s the sort of opponent you’re up against.”

“The sort of—What do you mean by that?” Tinasha demanded, wanting more details, but Travis vanished. He had said his piece and then disappeared, leaving her flabbergasted. “Wh-what just happened…?”

“Who knows…?” said Mila, exchanging glances with her mistress over Travis’s inscrutable conduct.

Curiously, when Tinasha had stated that love was not won through murder, Travis had appeared almost hurt. Tinasha was left with an indescribably bad taste in her mouth. “I feel so…disconcerted.”

“That’s usually what happens when you get involved with him. Are you going to search for this ‘insect’?”

“If I can, but I don’t have the slightest idea who it could be,” Tinasha admitted, tapping a finger against her temple. Then she shook her head and reached for her mage’s robe. “For now, I’m going to get some exercise at the training grounds. Maybe I’ll think of something—or at least clear my head. If I can best Oscar, the rules say I can knock him down. I want to.”

“I’ve never seen you get a hit in on the Akashia swordsman, though.”

“That’s because I’m not using magic!” Tinasha shouted back, flying out of the room once she was done changing. Mila smirked as she watched her go.

“I didn’t get to clear my head…”

“Did you say something?”

“No, nothing,” Tinasha replied as she summoned invisible orbs.

She sent them speeding toward Oscar, who sliced all of them down silently. This was only the ninth time they had done these drills, and Oscar had nearly mastered his magical sight.

At first, he had proposed that Tinasha practice this with him during their sword training, but that left her unable to concentrate on meeting his swings. So they did first one and then the other. Oscar had started his magical-sight lessons later than Tinasha's sword combat, but he was making far more noticeable progress.

As she increased the speed of the orbs, Tinasha asked him about something else. "Ultimately, what do you think you're going to do?"

"What indeed," the young king replied, making it sound like somebody else's problem.

Curling her lip, Tinasha fired three orbs to land at once. But Oscar took half a step back and dispatched them neatly. Tinasha felt irritated at how unaffected the man appeared.

"Well, is the matter already settled or not?" she pressed.

"I haven't decided. Hmm. Considering what's best for another country is a different story, however. I'll go with the flow."

"…Shouldn't you just get married and annex her country?"

"Sounds annoying," he stated flatly, making Tinasha's eyebrows knit. Oscar went on as he fielded an even more vicious hail of invisible attacks. "Even if I invade and expand Farsas, it's hard to say what could happen after my death. And in that case, the status quo is perfectly fine."

Underneath his words lay a confident assertion—that as long as he was alive, he was confident he could handle things, no matter how large the country got. Looking at him acting like this was no big deal shifted Tinasha's unease into ire. She vented her anger into drawing up a spell.

"Strands of spider silk, go forth and capture."

Immediately, a gigantic net came down on Oscar. His eyes wide, he slid his blade over the core of the spell.

But the spell, which should have been torn to pieces, repaired itself. Ballooning, it rushed for him. Oscar took a huge leap back, but the spell closed the distance immediately.

The magic net reached him, invisible webbing entangling itself around his entire body until he couldn't move. Oscar narrowed his eyes at Tinasha. "What the hell is this…?"

"It's what Travis did to me before. Unless you strike its multiple vital points at the same time, it will reconstitute. The real thing sank through to the bone. It seemed like I could use it, so I crafted an imitation."

"…I see," Oscar remarked, perhaps saying nothing more beyond that because he sensed she was taking her vexation out on him. Once she undid the spell, he sighed and walked back over to her. Checking his grip on his sword, he beckoned to her. "Your turn now, then."

"Go ahead."

Oscar hated the idea of bruising Tinasha, but once he got into the practice mentality, he struck at her mercilessly.

And though he was going easy on her, he didn't balk at injuring her.

Someone else may have objected, but Tinasha was grateful for it.

No pain, no gain—she didn't expect it to be otherwise. And besides, once she sunk into the thrill of battle, it hardly bothered her.

Catching her breath, Tinasha lifted her sword and leaped off the ground toward Oscar. The air around her was imbued with an illusion of crystal-clear awareness.

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Nephelli's personal mage, Gait, pondered what to do next as he guarded her door that evening.

Oscar and Als had alluded to a traitor among the party from Yarda. Other than himself, only three officers, one mage, and two ladies-in-waiting had come to Farsas, but he found all of them to be trustworthy. He wouldn't know which one to suspect. Nephelli didn't know about the turncoat, but she tended to stay shut up in her room, perhaps suspecting that something was amiss. Recently, she took all her meals alone there.

"Can Princess Nephelli hold out like this…?"

"What's wrong?" came a voice to his side, and Gait looked over to see the other mage who had come from Yarda. He had brown hair and a friendly face, and he was eminently capable despite his youth.

Gait, who was on his fifth year working as a court mage, winced at the other man. "Oh, Valt. I was just thinking that if we came all the way to Farsas only to be targeted by an assassin, maybe we should have remained in Yarda…"

If the enemy only had the courage to act because they were somewhere the king of Yarda couldn't reach, then fleeing abroad had been a mistake. Strange as it was, Princess Nephelli might have been safer in her homeland. As Gait thought on that, Valt shook his head. "We can handle it better in Farsas. They have the royal sword."

"Akashia, huh…? But we don't know if we're up against a mage," Gait replied.

The one sword in the entire land that could neutralize any magic was indeed mighty, but it was only a sword—one that belonged to the king. He couldn't stay by Nephelli's side around the clock.

Valt laughed when he heard Gait's concern. "If anything, it's the bearer of Akashia who's more crucial than the sword itself. I'm positive he'll be a strong ally to Her Highness. And as for Farsas, they don't want anything to happen to a foreign royal within their borders. I'm sure they'll offer whatever assistance they can. Who knows? Perhaps this might forge a bond between our two nations in the days to come."

The man was referring to a marriage between Farsas and Yarda. Gait frowned on reflex. “Yes, that would certainly be what she also—”

Suddenly, a lady-in-waiting and an officer of Yarda arrived with Nephelli’s meal. Gait accompanied them into the room, where another other lady-in-waiting was arranging the princess’s hair.

“How are you doing, Princess Nephelli?” Gait inquired. In reply, she gave him a weak smile. Mere day-to-day life seemed to exhaust her. He gazed at this lovely princess, feeling his heart go out to her. “Would you care to venture outside your room? You’ll have your guards, and it would be a shame not to see Farsas while you’re here.”

“I suppose…,” Nephelli said with a nod. As Gait’s face fell, the ladies-in-waiting tasted the food for poison and served the princess her meal. She didn’t appear hungry as she turned her attention to it.

Gait urged her, “Try to eat just a little. You’re going to get yourself sick.”

“I know,” Nephelli replied, picking up a cup of tea and pressing it softly to her red lips.

Right after that came a *thud* as something heavy hit the floor. Gait looked in that direction and saw one of the ladies-in-waiting lying on the ground.

Her eyes were glassy and unfocused. Bloody foam dribbled from her mouth.

Time stood still. The scent of death sucked all sound from the room and wafted into the air.

For several horrible, blank seconds, Nephelli’s scream echoed throughout the entire castle, piercing enough to almost cut through that binding spell.

By the time people came running in, the lady-in-waiting was already dead.

Tinasha did a quick inspection, then shook her head at Kumu and Oscar as they arrived. “It’s a magic potion, though not a rare one. The maker is unknown. Sorry I can’t be more helpful.”

“That’s plenty. What was it put into?” asked Oscar.

“The soup. Apparently, she died after tasting it for poison.”

“We’ll find out who made it,” Oscar declared, already waving over a soldier to issue orders.

However, Tinasha moved to stop him. “I don’t think the potion was added during preparation. I ate the same thing myself.”

Oscar frowned, and Als added, “Many people had that soup besides Princess Tinasha, and they had no problems. Also, no trace of the concoction was found in the pot. The meal was brought in by a lady-in-waiting and officer of Yarda, but the officer has gone missing. According to her, he’s the one who picked up the meal.”

“That’s so suspicious it doesn’t seem real,” Oscar remarked with a snort. Evidently, the dead lady-in-waiting and missing officer had served the princess for many years. The soldier, Eneas, was close with the two ladies-in-waiting, giving him plenty of opportunities to contaminate the food. Such

was Gait's theory. For now, Oscar ordered a search of the castle to discover if Eneas was hiding within.

After Oscar and his close associates moved to a nearby council room, Gait bowed his head deeply before the king. "I'm aware this is an imposition, but would you be willing to lend your assistance to Princess Nephelli?"

"Of course. We'll tighten her guard and capture whoever did this."

"Thank you. But I was referring to something more…" Gait trailed off, hesitating. The meaning was obvious. Gait wanted a more fundamental type of aid. Namely, Oscar intervening directly in Yarda's internal conflict.

Was the crown prince in Yarda so unreliable that his subjects had to beg a foreign king for help? Many in the room held scathing opinions of Gait's request, but it seemed like there was more to the story.

Gait continued, though there was a keen uncertainty to his tone. "Princess Nephelli has held you in high regard for ten years now. Won't you…?"

Oscar held up a hand, silencing the other man. Next to him, Tinasha had her eyes closed and a blank look on her face. Oscar scowled internally at the meaning implicit in Gait's words.

It absolutely would not be worth it. He didn't hate Nephelli or anything like that, but it would be more trouble than anything to take her as a queen or mistress and intervene in Yarda's affairs. It certainly wouldn't be fun.

However, that didn't mean he wanted to make a clear rejection of the offer. More than likely, the Yardan royal family had been hoping for his involvement all along.

Carefully masking his reluctance behind a calm front, Oscar said, "Understood. I'll do what I can."

Visible relief washed over Gait's face. He bowed deeply. Oscar asked him a few more follow-up questions before dismissing him.

In an even voice, Tinasha inquired, "Have you decided to get involved?"

"Looks like I have no choice."

"I'll help you, then."

"…Sorry about this," Oscar apologized as Tinasha faced forward, not looking at him.

The king felt somewhat heavyhearted, though he did not know rightly why.

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"Prime Minister Zisis and Crown Prince Savas were more or less just as you said, Princess Tinasha."

Three days had passed since the attempted poisoning, and Eneas was yet to be found. Renart had gone to Yarda on Tinasha's orders and was now delivering a summarized account.

Originally, Renart worked for Legis, but as of late, he carried out Tinasha's orders more often than not. The two were in Tinasha's quarters in Farsas, sipping tea as they went over the report.

"When Savas began to dip his toes into assisting with public affairs, he rejected the prime minister's reform proposal and other suggestions on the grounds that they were 'too unconventional.' At the same time, he appointed his relatives to various posts and stripped Zisis of his power. The king grew ill shortly thereafter."

"What are these relatives he's appointed like?" questioned Tinasha.

"Royal blood is all they have, it seems. All they do is waste money on frivolities."

"Hmm… Saving the royal family doesn't sound much like saving Yarda."

"That might be so. But it's possible that the royal family considers themselves the country itself," Renart pointed out.

Tinasha had wavered over it considerably, but she only wished to help Oscar, not Yarda. There was no need for her to concern herself with the ethics or future ramifications of the situation.

Just then, there was a light rap at the door. Renart answered it and brought in the guest. Tinasha's eyes widened at this unexpected visitor.

"You are…"

"My name is Valt, Your Highness."

The mage smiled brightly and bowed. This was one of Nephelli's guards; Tinasha had caught a glimpse of him before at the training grounds.

She stared intently at him. "You're suppressing your magic. In truth, you have more than a nation's chief mage, don't you?"

"Oh, certainly not that much. It's simply that most of that magic is acquired, and I don't need others knowing about it, so I keep it hidden," he replied.

Tinasha nodded. How exactly one came to possess more than their natural amount of magical power was a private matter, often concerning unique circumstances. Tinasha herself was the same way, so she pressed that matter no further. Instead, she asked, "Why have you come to see me? Do you have some idea who the assassin is?"

"No, nothing to do with that…," he admitted, looking uncomfortable as he showed her the books of magic he was holding. "I had a question about a spell. I'm sorry to bother you at this hour."

Tinasha was taken aback at this but soon broke into a smile. Tuldarr attracted the interest and admiration of mages from other countries. Approving of this young man who made no secret of his passion for study, even under such circumstances, Tinasha offered him a seat.

"Go ahead and ask. I hope it's something I can answer. Whatever I can't, Renart can."

"Princess Tinasha, I'm not sure this is…"

"I'll take you up on that, thank you," stated Valt.

Sitting around the table, the three of them debated various topics related to magic. It was a wonderful break for Tinasha, who had been spending all her time and energy on curse analysis and coronation arrangements as of late.

After their third cup of tea, Valt got to his feet. Beaming, he said, "Thank you so much. Now I'll be at liberty to get back to guarding Princess Nephelli. We've obtained the cooperation of the king of Farsas, too, so their engagement should come any day now."

"What?" Tinasha replied blankly.

Valt went on, matter-of-factly. "That is Yarda's intention, considering that he's taken Her Highness into his care. It's the perfect opportunity, seeing as the pair have been acquainted for so long. I'm positive they'll make for a loving couple." After a pause, he added, "Princess Tinasha, that man will be perfectly happy no matter whom he marries."

Valt broke off there, fixing Tinasha with an incredibly earnest look. "So you should set yourself free as well."

He flashed her a wry smile, as if sympathizing with her.

What did Valt mean by that? While Tinasha was too stunned to speak, Renart said, “What do you think you’re doing? She is—”

“I am well aware she’s the princess of Tuldarr. Please take very good care of yourself. Thank you for indulging me.”

Before Tinasha could get a word out, Valt bowed smoothly and took his leave.

Tinasha had the distinct sensation of having been left behind. She glanced at the tabletop, where cups full of cooled tea sat.

“Set myself free…?”

Valt had looked at her with the eyes of one who could see through to the truth of almost all he heard. Maybe that explained the keen sense of loss Tinasha felt. She pressed a hand to her aching heart.

“…Who he marries is not my concern.”

Farsas wasn’t her home, nor were she and Oscar mere citizens. Forlorn or not, she couldn’t let her feelings get the better of her. There was no other option. She would just live out the rest of her life with this inexhaustible heat inside her.

Tinasha thought of the day she would leave Farsas. Her coronation was in less than three weeks.

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Another week passed, but the missing officer still hadn’t turned up. That night, a despondent Nephelli reluctantly left her room at the personal invitation of Oscar. She made her way to the great hall, ringed by her guard soldiers and lady-in-waiting. A deep-blue carpet covered the floor of the glass-ceilinged chamber; bowls of fruit and cooked dishes were laid out on top of it.

From deeper within, the king of the castle asked her, “How are you feeling?”

“I’m very sorry I made you go to all this trouble…”

“It’s no hassle. I should be apologizing for the lack of progress in our search,” Oscar stated, sitting down directly on the carpet and encouraging Nephelli and her attendants to partake of the food. The princess’s guard contingent consisted of two military officers named Nino and Lucanos, as well as Valt the mage. On Oscar’s side were Als, Kumu, Doan, and Sylvia. The entire group sat in a circle.

Nephelli, seated next to Oscar, gradually began to smile as he urged food and wine on her. For the first time in a while, she began to feel relieved.

A half hour after the modest banquet commenced, a pair of mages appeared at the entrance to the hall. One was the next queen of Tuldarr, and the other was her attendant.

As Tinasha brushed her long black hair back, she surveyed the guests and then waved to the king.

“Pardon the intrusion, but I’ll be going back to Tuldarr for a while.”

“Got it. Is it urgent?” Oscar inquired.

“Not particularly,” she answered, smiling faintly.

Sylvia grinned. “Princess Tinasha, won’t you have a drink before you go?”

“I’ll get yelled at if I drink in Farsas.”

“That’s right. Oh, then sing us a song, if your matter is nothing pressing. You’re here and everything,” said Oscar.

“A song?” Tinasha repeated, acting a little hesitant, but ultimately, she acquiesced to his request.

She sat down between Sylvia and Doan and summoned a small lyre into her hands. After strumming it once to check all the strings, she began to sing in a clear voice.

“You wish for the unseen, and the unseen is a different thing.
No matter how brightly the sun’s rays shine on the earth, some things will never come to light.
Her face is forgotten, but her song goes on and on.
Fragmented memories wander about like traces of a dream long past.”

Her resonant voice had the power to sink deep beneath the skin.

The guests’ eyes fluttered closed naturally as they listened in ecstasy. The lyrics brought to mind scenes from ancient history.

Tinasha’s song melted into the evening air as she sang the verses once more, languidly, before drawing to a close. Her listeners remained enraptured, however, as if they had come to the end of a long story and could not break free from it right away. Save lingering reverberations of the song, silence fell upon the hall.

Tinasha stood and returned to the doorway, where Renart was waiting. She smiled. “I will be on my way, then.”

“Okay. Be careful getting back,” Oscar replied.

“Princess Nephelli, please take good care of yourself, too,” Tinasha appended.

“All right…,” Nephelli muttered.

Tinasha spread her arms wide and said the incantation for a transportation array. She opened a portal large enough to encompass Renart, too. As she watched them wink out of sight, Nephelli let out another deep sigh.

Aware that Nephelli remained in low spirits, Oscar took the opportunity at the end of the banquet to invite her to go outside the castle with him the following day. There was a small lake a little south of the city, and they could do some hunting while they were out.

Nephelli was reluctant to accept, but as it was a special invitation from him, and security would be heavily tightened up, she agreed.

The following morning, she woke up early and began selecting her outfit for the day. There was still plenty of time before they were to meet. After a

great deal of indecision, she chose a white dress, as Oscar seemed to favor them.

It had been an exceedingly long time since she had enjoyed something to look forward to like this. She borrowed a horse and rode out to the castle gate, where he was waiting for her. Once close enough, she beamed at him.

After staring at Nephelli, Oscar gave some order to the lady-in-waiting behind her. She ran off, returning quickly with a short veil.

“You might get sunburned,” Oscar explained.

“Th-thank you…,” Nephelli mumbled, unaware how her cheeks were flushing as she put on the veil.

Such keen thoughtfulness was welcome. It made her feel warm and cherished.

Oscar and Nephelli passed through a transportation array along with a party of twenty guards. It took them to a clearing just before a small forest. On closer inspection, a path led deep into the middle of the woods. It appeared to branch off along the way.

“The woods aren’t dense enough for one to lose their way—but don’t leave my side. The lake is on the other side of these woods,” Oscar said, and Nephelli nodded and carefully urged her horse to follow after his. Right behind her were Gait and Valt, as well as Nino and Lucanos, the Yardan officers. Farsasian soldiers rode at the front and rear of the party, while mages were interspersed throughout. It was more than enough to defend against an attack.

As he led his horse with one hand on the reins, Oscar turned to Nephelli. “It’s best you get some fresh air outside every so often.”

“Thank you for thinking of me,” she responded, smiling at him.

While the princess knew there was still an emotional distance between the two, this gave her hope for closing it.

As the party meandered through the forest, they passed many forks in the road.

Suddenly, the light grew dim. Looking up, Nephelli saw that clouds had formed overhead. They were flowing quickly, suggesting swift winds in the sky.

Oscar turned back to gaze at Nephelli. She inhaled sharply, sensing a sharp glint in his dusk-colored eyes. She opened her mouth to say something.

However, Nephelli was quickly silenced as a curious fog rolled in. It grew denser at an unnatural speed until she couldn’t see a thing.

“Wha…?” she gasped, about to break into an instinctive cry of fear, but a man’s hand reached out from the mist to steady her.

When he suddenly couldn’t see in front of him, Gait frantically urged his horse ahead toward his lady.

“Princess Nephelli!”

The vapor was so thick that he couldn’t see his own hands. Desperately, he felt around in the air.

His hand landed on a soft body.

“Gait?” asked a clear and familiar voice. It was his lady. Just as relief swept over the man, the mist thinned as abruptly as it had appeared. Surroundings became visible once more, and light poured in from above.

Now that Gait could see, he was aghast as he realized there was something very wrong. Glancing behind him, he saw Valt and the two officers staring around, just as stunned.

At some point, every single person from Farsas—including the king—had vanished.

“Wh-what in the world…?”

The three men exchanged glances and stayed on guard, but there were no signs of any suspicious presences. Unfortunately, there was nothing to suggest the people from Farsas were around, either.

Gait turned back around and said to a shaken-looking Nephelli, “Princess, let’s go back to the castle for now. I’ll open a transportation array.”

“But…”

“You are our top priority. Once we’ve gotten you to a safe place, we can worry about the others.”

Nephelli hesitated for quite a while before finally giving a little nod. With his lady’s permission, Gait began an incantation. However, he couldn’t transport them directly inside another country’s castle; he could only take them outside its front gate.

Just as the portal was opening, something whizzed toward the group from the trees.

It was an arrow headed straight for Nephelli. Fortunately, it struck a barrier Valt had erected, and then it fell. The party was startled for only a moment before a hail of projectiles rained down from all around.

“Assassins!”

The two officers drew their swords. Arrows were coming from the left-hand side, deep in the foliage. Lucanos shouted, “That way—and hurry!”

In the direction he indicted, something glittered in a gap through the trees—the lake. Everyone made for it, with Nino riding in the lead.

Just before arriving at the lake’s shore, Nino jerked hard on his horse’s reins. Roughly thirty mounted men were barring the way. One glance at their motley attire revealed that they were not soldiers, but some sort of bandit crew. Their weapons already drawn, they smirked at the woman in the center of their group of five.

“That’s the girl. Don’t let her get away.”

When Gait heard that, he sprang into action. If this was all part of a plot, then he had to ensure Nephelli’s escape, at the very least.

He wove a teleportation spell and reached out to the woman in front of him.

As he did, however, the unthinkable happened.

Behind Nephelli, Lucanos slowly lifted his sword to bring it down on his princess.

Gait was momentarily stunned by the cold gaze the other man fixed on Nephelli.

“Princess Nephelli!” he cried, too late.

While Gait shook with dread that he had lost his one chance, Lucanos grinned, confident he would carry out his task.

Astonishingly, both of their expectations were dashed.

Nephelli pulled her own sword out of nowhere and parried Lucanos’s slash away.

The would-be killer stared dumbly at her blade, which was glowing a faint purple.

Amused, she let out a laugh. “It was you?”

She tore off her veil.

Underneath was the face of the frighteningly beautiful mage of Tuldarr. “Ridiculous! When did you change places?!”

“Before, obviously. You’re so slow,” Tinasha taunted, keeping her eyes on Lucanos as she turned her horse around. A cruel smile split her red lips.

Next to her, Gait was in shock. “That can’t be… How could I mistake the princess…? Where is she…?”

“She’s with Oscar. They’re fine. My curse song made you mix us up. Last night, I altered your awareness, although it evidently didn’t work on everyone,” she admitted, shooting a look at Valt. He gave a guilty smile.

Gait, on the other hand, hadn’t picked up on it in the slightest; his jaw dropped open. He knew of curse songs but would have never expected there to be anyone who could use one.

Lucanos, having revealed himself as the assassin, looked flustered as he backed his horse up. Tinasha directed a mesmeric smile at him. “Did you kill the missing officer? He was close to the lady-in-waiting, so he knew about the poison tasting. I surmised that the real assailant killed him to buy time. So all that was left was to bring whoever remained into the open.”

Tinasha readied her sword, a provocative grin on her face. “You can’t fall back now. You attacked me; that’s undeniable. Now it’s Tuldarr who will deal with you.”

“Damn you…,” Lucanos growled, resentful over his failure. Tinasha kicked at her horse and rode toward the man, thrusting her slender sword at him. He defended with his own blade and struck back at her.

As she dodged his blow, Tinasha cried to the last three men, “Valt, hold the barrier! You two, watch the rear!”

“Yes,” Valt replied immediately. Gait and Nino obeyed in kind.

The bandits were galloping toward them on the thin passage through the forest. Despite his nerves, Gait drew up a spell aimed at them. Seven light blades burst forth and struck the center of the oncoming group.

The conjured things flew through the air and cut down the first ten riders, who fell limp from their horses, spurting blood.

Yet the enemy was only confused for a moment; the other bandits let out a war cry and continued the charge. The awful sound of their horses' hooves trampling over their fallen comrades filled the woods.

Nino rode out in front of Gait and slashed at the brigands. He inhaled sharply, and his next sword strike brought death upon one ruffian.

The difference in swordplay between a court officer and a bandit was stark, but the enemy had ever more men.

Fortunately, just as the Yardans were losing hope, Farsasian soldiers appeared behind the brigand party.

Als was leading them from the vanguard. "You can kill them all. Don't let them get away!"

Cries rang out. In an instant, the forest turned into a battlefield.
Tinasha kept her hands on the reins of her steed even as she parried away Lucanos's fierce slashes.

This was her first time using a sword in a duel to the death. She had guessed that Lucanos might run away once she revealed who she really was, but he seemed intent on slaying her. Perhaps he was too focused to realize the rational decision. Tinasha met his strikes, though her nerves bled into her movements.

Lucanos grinned. "Not used to real combat, huh? If only you hadn't stuck your nose in another country's affairs. You could have lived a comfortable life."

"I'm used to battle. I'm just not accustomed to a sword," Tinasha asserted. Even so, she had to overcome this. That's what being a ruler meant.

Lucanos drove his heavy blade at her from head-on, taking advantage of the difference in height between them.

Tinasha flicked it away with a snap of her wrist, which twinged with pain. Tightening her fingers around the hilt of her weapon, she slashed at Lucanos's neck. She could see him drawing his sword back lightly and moving to drive it toward her left side.

But she didn't waver. She absolutely had to stand her ground.

Tinasha held her breath.

For a moment, she heard someone scolding her from the back of her mind: *Use magic!*

However, Tinasha refused with a daring smile.

She wouldn't cast a spell. Instead, she raised her left elbow to stop her opponent's blow.

I am faster.

Convinced of that, Tinasha thrust her blade into his neck.

Her hand tingled with a dull, heavy feel. A spray of blood bloomed, and Lucanos's face twisted.

At the same time, the edge of his sword bit into her elbow.

"Ugh… Ah!"

Tinasha’s mind went blank with the pain, but she pushed through it via force of will. She pulled out her blade. Lucanos’s dropped, his arm hanging slack. He was swaying unsteadily on his horse, and Tinasha eyed him, breathing heavily herself.

“…Tell me the name of the one who sent you.”

His head was bowed, his windpipe pierced through, yet he was still on his horse. As planned, Tinasha hadn’t killed him. She would heal Lucanos and get him to tell her everything he knew. After that, the nations involved could decide his fate.

Unfortunately, the moment Tinasha spoke and lowered her weapon, a blow came rushing toward her at a terrifying speed.

“Wha—?”

The attack came at an unguarded moment. Lucanos should have been on the verge of death, but he still possessed the strength to brandish his sword. Tinasha drew up a defensive spell. Her hastily cast barrier repelled the strike on its downswing…but it smashed the skull of the horse she was riding. The force of impact threw Tinasha from the saddle, and she collided hard with the ground.

“Guh…”

The impact knocked the breath out of the young woman. The pain left her consciousness hazy. A black figure suddenly appeared above her. With blurred vision, she saw his sword bear down upon her again.

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For a short moment, Tinasha recalled the dagger that had almost stabbed into her when she was a girl, a very long time ago now.

Like it, this blade did not reach her. Another sword entered the fray to repel Lucanos's thrust.

"Why aren't you using magic? Are you stupid?!" someone chided loudly.

Tinasha gasped. Unintentionally, his name slipped from her mouth.

"Oscar…"

The double-edged royal sword sparkled like a mirror. As she gazed up at the man who wielded it…Tinasha felt something hot in her throat.

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It was clear from one look that Tinasha was seriously wounded. Her left arm was almost cut off, and the fall from her horse had left her legs unnaturally twisted. Fierce anger rose up in Oscar for a moment when he saw her like that, but he quickly tamped down those emotions that could cloud his judgment.

To Valt behind him, he said, "I've embroiled you in some trouble. Thanks for the help."

"Not at all. I can't have her dying on me," he replied with a wincing smile. He had used teleportation to summon Oscar, who was waiting on standby in a separate location. While the unplanned summons came as a shock, the king was nonetheless grateful to Valt. He only felt pure exasperation over how Tinasha could have gotten herself so roughed up in such a short period of time.

Oscar stared up at the assassin, still on his horse. He asked Valt, "Why is he moving? The man looks too wounded to even ride."

"He's probably swallowed a seed from a forbidden curse. It activates when the user receives a life-threatening injury, giving them superhuman strength. In exchange, they lose all reason and consciousness… The Yardan prime minister doesn't have those kinds of connections, so Lucanos must have obtained it elsewhere."

"Understood. Guess that explains *that*," Oscar said, keeping one eye on Lucanos. New skin had stitched together over his blood-smeared throat, and spots pulsed all over his body as it gradually swelled.

Tinasha stood, having used a basic treatment to mend her wounds. "The best method would be to blow him up, since that type of forbidden curse means his injuries will just keep healing forever… But then we can't get any information out of him."

"We have to capture him alive, otherwise what we did won't look justified," Oscar declared.

"After I went through the effort of fighting only with a sword so I wouldn't kill him by accident."

“How about don’t get yourself injured in the first place? If it’s going to get you hurt, blow him up.”

All throughout their matter-of-fact exchange, Oscar and Tinasha kept their eyes fixed on Lucanos. From atop his mount, the man’s eyes had already clouded over with white. His horse whinnied, perhaps aware of its rider’s odd state.

Valt asked Tinasha, “If you don’t know how to deal with this, should I help you?”

“No, it’s all right. I have him,” she replied, looking to the wielder of Akashia next to her with eyes full of pure trust. “Oscar, can you see the magic that’s settled inside him?”

“More or less. I can almost make out some white lines all over his body, like veins of a leaf.”

“There’s a place below the pit of his stomach where magic has conspicuously accumulated. Smash through that with Akashia. That’s the core of the spell.”

The king narrowed his eyes. Sure enough, there was a part of Lucanos’s belly glowing brighter than anywhere else. “I see it, but any normal person would die from a stab wound there.”

“Leave that to me. I’ll keep him alive enough to get testimony out of him,” Tinasha assured.

“Got it. You take care of that… Don’t rack up any more injuries,” Oscar remarked. With his warning given, he directed his attention to Lucanos. The assassin’s gaze remained unfocused—head wobbling unsteadily. Blood dripped onto the horse, which practically shrieked.

Tinasha added with a calm voice, “Don’t touch his blood if at all possible. You’ll get contaminated by the curse. If you *do* touch it, I will have to give you the most thorough purifying bath of your life, so don’t complain later.”

“Not sure how to respond to that. I can’t decide which option sounds better.”

“Don’t! Touch me! Joke around like that, and I’ll blow you away along with him!”

Before Tinasha finished speaking, Oscar was already dashing forward. He dodged Lucanos’s sword bearing down on him from overhead by a hair, then drove Akashia into the wildly bucking horse’s neck.

The animal collapsed in a huge spray of blood, Lucanos tumbling from its back with a *thunk*. With oddly distorted limbs, he charged.

His sword came rushing at Oscar, so fast it was invisible to the naked eye.

Fortunately, Oscar parried the weapon away. The impact made his entire arm numb down to his hand.

“That thing’s heavy. Guess that’s his inhuman strength,” Oscar spat wryly, dodging to the right to evade Lucanos’s second strike. He cut in on the man’s left side, but before he could take advantage of that opening, the greatsword swept in sideways toward him.

The movement was so swift it seemed impossible for something so battered and monstrous. Astounded by this wholly unexpected move, Oscar leaped out of the way. Lucanos kicked the dead horse toward him.

With a muffled thump, the beast's huge frame exploded. Flesh and blood flew at Oscar, but an invisible wall erected by Tinasha prevented it from making contact. However, the crimson plastered on that transparent wall covered up everything else. By the time Oscar thought *Shit,* he was already jumping to the left.

Lucanos's broadsword tore through the air and plunged into the ground. Tremors shook the earth, sending up pebbles to pelt Oscar's body.

Heedless of the light pain, Oscar made his way forward. He swung Akashia at Lucanos's sword hand, but once again, his opponent's broadsword barred the way. The clang of metal echoed through the woods.

"This is never-ending," Oscar muttered.

So long as the king kept his distance to avoid Lucanos's blood, his only option was to win in a single blow.

Oscar prepared another attack, and the monstrous Lucanos raised his weapon in kind.

And then—he threw it.

"What?"

It was a completely nonstandard move. Shocked, Oscar evaded the flying sword reflexively.

Unfortunately, Lucanos had seemingly anticipated as much, for he reached out and grabbed ahold of the king's right shoulder—and crushed it from the armor down to the bone with a dull *snap*. Sharp pain lanced through Oscar's entire body.

"OSCAR!" Tinasha screamed.

Had the king not been staring down a monster, he might have turned to look at her.

Lucanos's neck was broken in half. His cloudy-white eyes stared at him.

Despite the severe pain from his crushed shoulder…Oscar laughed. "You think that's going to keep you from talking?"

A forbidden curse that ate into the flesh and stole all reason. That was nothing to fear. It wouldn't stop Oscar. Killing Lucanos would be easy, but if he did, so much would be left in the dark, unknown.

Oscar transferred Akashia to his left hand. "You've wronged many women while in my country." He set his sights on Lucanos's faintly glowing stomach. "But it ends here."

Lucanos drove a fist toward Oscar.

Akashia's blade glinted.

The tip of the royal sword pierced through the core of the forbidden curse.

The misshapen man's body jerked—and a black-haired mage came floating down behind him.

Still floating, Tinasha placed a hand on Lucanos's spine and smiled. "Now you're mine."

New magic poured into the broken core—an overwhelming power.

Light spilled forth, dispelling the stench of blood. It was the color of beginnings, signifying the end of this battle.

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The lack of contact was driving Zisis to the limits of his patience.

If no word had come indicating success or defeat, that meant Lucanos had been captured.

And in that case, Zisis needed to make a swift attack before Savas took action. Most of the magistrates, aside from the nobles Savas appointed, more or less agreed with Zisis's opinions. A third of the military also viewed him favorably, and he had the advantage when it came to connections in court.

Thus, it was now or never. He would reform his country.

The preparations were already in place. Whether people would speak of him after his death as a traitor who failed or an instigator of reform all depended on this moment.

His mind made up, Zisis opened his door only to find two baffled Yardan magistrates and two men he didn't recognize right outside. He eyed the pair of strangers suspiciously, and one stepped up to him. "My name is Doan, and I'm a messenger from Farsas. We've had an attack within our borders, and we'd like to ask you some questions. Please come with us back to Farsas."

Zisis sucked in a breath at the unexpected development but remained levelheaded. He replied coldly, "I'm afraid I have no idea what this is about. Also, why should I have to go to Farsas? If this has something to do with the princess you're hosting, that's a domestic matter, and we'll handle it here in Yarda."

The men exchanged glances. A confident smile bloomed on Zisis's face.

In the end, these Farsasians held no authority to arrest him concerning the attack on Nephelli. If they pressed the issue, he could object to it on the grounds of interference in another country's domestic affairs.

Wincing at Zisis's attitude, Doan took a step back. The other man moved to take his place, however. "What we'd like to ask you about is not related to the princess of Yarda. One of your subordinates has grievously wounded the princess of Tuldarr. Prince Legis is eager to question you on this matter."

"…What?" Zisis said, briefly paling. He took a moment to digest that.

I don't know why it would have come to that.

He knew that the princess of Tuldarr was in Farsas, but she should have been entirely unrelated. He had reminded Lucanos that he was not to lay a hand on anyone from Farsas, to the best of his ability.

The other messenger from Tuldarr, a man named Renart, asserted that because this transgression took place on Farsasian soil, Zisis would have to come to Farsas. Zisis caught a flash of murderous intent in his eyes.

“I trust you will come with us?”

The prime minister could not refuse. Recognizing that he was about to tumble from the hill he had painfully clawed his way up, Zisis shuddered. After Zisis was taken to Farsas via transportation array, he was escorted to a reception room.

The king of Farsas, the prince of Tuldarr, and Nephelli were all waiting there already.

Unlike Nephelli, who looked terribly uneasy, the other two regarded him coldly.

Renart pushed Zisis forward. Prince Legis of Tuldarr got the conversation started. In a sharp tone of voice that belied his gentle appearance, he said, “Now then, I believe you’ve heard what transpired. A military officer assigned to Princess Nephelli attacked Princess Tinasha. He utilized a forbidden curse of his own volition and lost his senses, but we have already healed him. Once we did, he confessed that he was acting on your instructions. Do you have anything you’d like to say?”

“I have done nothing…”

“We have many witnesses. Do you know that Princess Tinasha’s coronation is set for less than ten days from now? We could interpret this as a declaration of war from Yarda to Tuldarr.”

Blood drained from Nephelli’s face. As Zisis saw that out of the corner of his eye, he desperately racked his mind.

Being confronted with the facts of the situation felt like cold water thrown in his face.

Tuldarr was a nation of magic that took no sides. It had never invaded another nation, and except for the war with Tayiri four hundred years ago, it had never been attacked. Everyone understood that engaging in a magical conflict with Tuldarr was foolish. For the past four centuries, Tuldarr had dispatched mages all over the land to handle cases involving forbidden magic and large-scale magical elements. Their power was unquestionable and overwhelming.

No one could wage a war against Tuldarr in any capacity, least of all Yarda. It had only finally stabilized after receiving aid from Farsas. One glance at the stony look on Oscar’s face, and it was obvious that Yarda would be fighting alone and unassisted. Should things come to battle, the Magic Empire would lay them to waste.

That was the one thing the prime minister had to avoid at all costs.

Zisis’s thoughts whirled. He wondered if he could get away by denying culpability.

However, he rejected that notion. The fact that he had been summoned in front of all these people meant they could convict him even without proof.

There was no escape. The conspiratorial ring had closed in around him.

Zisis licked his lips.

It took no time for him to come to a decision. Falling to his knees, he bowed his head low.

“Everything was my decision alone. It has nothing to do with Yarda. Please let my life atone for this crime; I beg you.”

Once Renart arrested Zisis, the door into the reception chamber opened with impeccable timing. A man and woman entered. Zisis turned to look, his mouth agape.

The man was Prince Savas of Yarda, while the woman was someone he had never seen before. She was a peerless beauty, with striking long black hair and eyes the color of darkness.

She looked at Zisis and smiled. “It’s nice to meet you. I am Tinasha.”

“You’re—!” he cried, stunned. “A-are your injuries…?”

“They’re healed. I had broken bones here and there; they hurt…,” she stated carelessly, then took a step to the side.

Savas stepped forward. He wore a pensive look Zisis had never seen on him before, staring down at the kneeling prime minister.

Zisis met the prince’s gaze, faint surprise in his eyes. This fainthearted prince had always given nobles whatever they’d asked, and his dependent nature led him to fob off his responsibilities on others. Zisis found it unexpected that he would regard him not with reproach, but with remorse.

Savas spoke shakily. “Let us hear the full story in Yarda.”

“…Yes, Your Highness.”

The soldiers waiting behind Savas marched Zisis away. As he was led from the room, arms bound, Tinasha said to him, “You’re an interesting one. If you aren’t executed, you’d be welcome to come to my court. You’re the type of person we want.”

Such an astounding remark made Zisis’s eyes widen. In the background, Oscar scowled while Legis gave a pained smile. Nephelli and Savas were astonished.

Overcoming his surprise, Zisis bowed to Tinasha with a self-deprecating smile. “I am honored and grateful to hear that. However…Yarda is my homeland. If I can, I want to die in my own country.”

“I see. That’s too bad,” Tinasha replied with a smile and a wave. Once Zisis vanished outside the room, she sighed. “I got rejected.”

Her indifferent, somewhat cutesy pout drew the exasperated gaze of the others in the room.

After Zisis was sent home to Yarda, the royals and advisers of all three countries discussed how to handle the aftermath.

Everything had gone according to a secret plan arranged after Oscar decided to intervene. It was Tinasha who suggested bringing it to an end by provoking an attack after she and Nephelli changed places.

Oscar exhaled quietly. “I agreed to your scheme because I wanted this wrapped up quick, but it *was* interesting using the curse song.”

“We didn’t know who the culprit was, so I brought everyone under the curse song’s spell, although I did cast a resistance charm on those from Farsas ahead of time. It’s all undone now, and there should be no lingering effects,” Tinasha explained.

Curious, Legis mused, “You could manipulate their perception to such a degree, even though you and Princess Nephelli look nothing alike.”

“All I did was enhance their subjective impressions. I wore the same clothes she did and had a veil on,” she replied.

Tinasha had caused the fog in the forest. She took advantage of that to switch places with Nephelli, teleporting the princess and the Farsasian troops to a location a short distance away.

Oscar looked down at his cup of tea, brewed by Tinasha. “It took more time than expected at the end because he had a forbidden curse seed. That wasn’t in the plan.”

“Yes, it wasn’t good at all how gruesome the whole scene became once that got thrown into the mix. Purifying it was a pain, too,” Tinasha agreed.

They discussed it so calmly, apparently thinking nothing of how they both had been grievously wounded. Those who happened to be in the room with them were the ones spooked.

Tinasha passed the tea things to a lady-in-waiting and went over to Sylvia’s spot by the window to chat.

Ignoring her capricious action, Oscar, Legis, and Savas all agreed to keep this matter quiet and let Yarda handle the aftermath.

Savas bowed his head to the other two, stammering out his thanks. “Thank you very much for your assistance. Both Nephelli and I are endlessly grateful.”

Oscar and Legis gave him faint smiles in response. Savas got to his feet and headed for the door with his subordinates in tow. As he did, he nodded to Tinasha as well. “I’ve taken your words to heart. Thank you.”

“They were merely the irresponsible words of a foreigner. How you interpret what I said is up to you, and it’s nothing you need thank me for,” she replied, flashing him a roguish grin. Judging by this interaction, she had given him some sort of frank advice when in Yarda. Oscar stifled laughter over how meddlesome she could be, no matter what she said to the contrary.

“I promise to be there at your coronation. And er…” Savas broke off there, faltering. His gaze on Tinasha was heated.

She cocked her head curiously, awaiting what else he had to say, but nothing was forthcoming.

“Tinasha.”

She broke their eye contact upon hearing her name called from the table. With a smile, Legis beckoned her over. She bobbed her head at Savas and trotted back over to Legis.

“I’ll be leaving now,” Legis said.

“Sorry to make you come over even though you’re so busy. I’ll send you off,” she offered.

“As you wish,” he agreed. Over Tinasha’s shoulder, a warning glint flashed in Legis’s eyes. Savas froze, pierced by that gaze. The two of them said their good-byes to Oscar and the others in the room before teleporting away.

The mood in the chamber relaxed now that the people partly responsible for the previous tense atmosphere were gone, and Oscar smiled. “Well, you can’t blame him.”

Tinasha’s coronation was days away. Legis wouldn’t want any undesirable pests buzzing around, whether in her public life or her personal one. Aware that he was the one Legis should be wariest of, Oscar let out a long exhale and stood.

Nephelli was sitting across from him, and he said to her, “You can finally go back home. I imagine you’ll want to after everything that’s happened.”

“I-it hasn’t been all bad. Thank you,” she answered, leaping to her feet and falling into step next to Oscar. They left the room and set off down the corridor.

Facing forward, Nephelli asked in a low voice, “Do you remember our proposal from ten years ago?”

“The one from the truce talks? I do, more or less.”

Nephelli took a deep breath and looked to the man next to her.

Fine features. Blue eyes that stared ahead.

Overcoming her momentary hesitation, Nephelli took the leap. “If I said that I wished to marry you now, would you accept?”

Oscar’s expression stiffened, and his gaze fell upon her.

A silence settled for a few moments, and Oscar seemed to be deliberating over how to respond.

“Hmm… Should that become advantageous for both of us, I will be the one to suggest it.”

Indirect phrasing.

What he meant by that was that he had no personal interest in her—and that they would only marry if it became politically necessary.

Nephelli had expected this bittersweet reply.

She was a royal, too, of course. Falling in love freely was not a luxury she’d ever possessed. Still, she couldn’t deny that a part of her had dared to dream.

Even now that those hopes were dashed, she didn’t feel resentful. This was only natural.

Nephelli blinked slowly, then looked forward again. She walked forth with pride. Even if nothing came of it, her feelings were real. That alone was somewhat satisfying.

The bitter part of her would change in time. Thus, she moved ahead.

She carried more than her own responsibilities on her shoulders.

After Zisis returned to Yarda and his crimes were made public, he received a life sentence in prison.

Following that, Prince Savas gradually grew into a better leader, one not so easily swayed by the opinions of nobles, and garnered the respect of his people.

Often, he visited Zisis in prison, seeking his council and trying to fumble his way to growing into a good ruler. When Tinasha later heard of this, she only gave a little, silent smile.

That was a story that ran separately from hers, on a separate path.

※

“Still, I ended up troubling you much more than I thought I would this time…,” grumbled Tinasha. She was brewing tea in the king’s study after Nephelli had returned to Yarda.

“You mean what happened with Lucanos? Let me handle situations like that. You taking it on just means I have to come in to clean up your messes.”

“But wasn’t keeping the princess safe your top priority?! She would have been in danger if more enemies had appeared!”

That was why it had been decided, after much deliberation, that Oscar would keep Nephelli safe while Tinasha faced the assassin. The plan had only veered somewhat off course due to the unanticipated curse seed.

Tinasha sighed deeply. “I thought I had gotten a little better with a sword, but I suppose you can’t tell that until you experience real combat…”

“If you want real combat, come down to the training grounds. I’ll get you nice and bruised up.”

“That’s not what I meant! I’m going to repay you for saving me!”

“It suits Farsas perfectly well to have the queen of Tuldarr owe us a favor.”

“This is a personal favor and has nothing to do with politics!” Tinasha huffed, sticking out her tongue before sinking onto the couch.

As he eyed her slender legs, the gears in Oscar’s mind started to turn. “A personal favor, huh…? I can think of lots of ways to get you to pay it back, but they’ll turn into problems later for a queen.”

“What sort of harassment are you thinking of doing?!” she cried very earnestly. In truth, Oscar was in her debt as well.

Oscar laughed loudly. “I’m not thinking of making you do anything. Just… Hmm, yeah.”

He stared straight at her.

Hair and eyes the color of a moonless night. Skin whiter than snow. Her entire existence as brilliant as a fully blossomed flower.

A miraculously beautiful woman from four hundred years ago. Inside, she was a proud queen…and just a lonely little girl.

Oscar cast her a faint smile. “I’ll make you more outfits, so wear them and come visit Farsas. Once a year is enough.”

On their divergent paths, they could only be together for a short time. If he could dress her up however he liked for that brief time, he knew he could feel happy even if he had to let go of her.

Tinasha blinked her dark eyes slowly at his request. “That’s enough?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t understand you.”

“Just let it go. It’s what I’m into, and it’ll be a nice distraction,” Oscar stated dismissively, holding back from adding more. He started signing documents.

She watched him intently. After some hesitation, she said cautiously, “Oh, right, Oscar. Are you all right with Princess Nephelli leaving?”

“Why do you ask? There’s no point in keeping her here any longer, and she wanted to go home, too.”

“But you and she—” Tinasha broke off there, her shapely eyebrows drawing together. At her pause, Oscar looked up.

As their gazes met, emotions they couldn’t speak swirled between them.

Feelings they wouldn’t admit and love they were unaware of.

With heat flooding her slender body, the queen’s eyelashes trembled as she asked, “So does that mean…I can stay here just a little while longer?”

Tinasha’s heart was in her throat. Her clear voice gave the impression of a finely yet tightly wound thread.

Conscious of the ripples that voice sent through him, Oscar replied calmly, “Do what you want. So long as you’re not queen yet.”

With an end in sight, reality was easy enough to accept.

Visible relief washed over Tinasha’s face when she heard that.

Just then, there was a knock at the door, and Doan came in. He looked so concerned that the king asked, “What is it? Did something happen?”

“Ah, it’s just that something is bothering me a little about Yarda’s handling of the aftermath. You know the other mage who came with Princess Nephelli?”

“Ah, Valt. I invited him to come to Tuldarr, too,” remarked Tinasha.

“I told you to stop trying to just poach people from other countries! No more doing that while you’re in Farsas!” Oscar objected.

“That’s all up to the person, isn’t it? I’m just opening up a conversation,” she countered.

Unchecked, these two would go off topic right away, so Doan interjected, a very serious look on his face. “About him… His name isn’t in the Yardan royal court records.”

“What?” replied Oscar, and Tinasha’s eyes widened.

Doan continued, consulting the papers he was carrying. “By all accounts, he doesn’t exist. The princess and Gait seem to think he’s been working for the court for five years, but that’s a memory he planted in them temporarily. Over the course of our correspondence, I realized that Gait was missing memories he should have ordinarily possessed.”

“So you’re saying…”

Valt was a spirit sorcerer. That he had altered Nephelli's memories, to say nothing of those of a court mage like Gait, was no small feat.

Tinasha was at a loss. Oscar asked, "Did something happen with this Valt guy?"

"He's gone missing. At some point, he just disappeared. I looked into him because the mage who Delilah described in her testimony sounded a lot like him," answered Doan.

"The mage who had dealings with that religious cult?!"

If Valt and that mage were one and the same, that would mean he was the one who had poisoned Tinasha. Were that the case, why had he saved her during the most recent incident?

Tinasha clapped a hand to her mouth; evidently the same thought had occurred to her. "What…? But why…?"

Her face paled with fear of the inexplicable. Oscar took notice of it and said to Doan, "Launch an investigation. He can't be allowed to further whatever agenda he's laboring for."

Tinasha would be departing Farsas soon. Once she did, Oscar wouldn't be able to come to her rescue.

The king's tone of voice was harsh, and Doan bowed his head in silence. Once he left the study, Oscar said decisively, "Don't let it bother you. Stick to your duties."

Tinasha had crossed a span of four hundred years, and he wanted her to make her own intrepid way forth in this era.

Oscar hoped there would be no sadness along her path. Even if he was only fooling himself, he still felt that way.

An expression of surprise spread across Tinasha's face, but it quickly softened into a smile. "I came here to be of use to you, after all."

The way she spoke sounded as though she were tightly clutching something precious.

Oscar's eyes narrowed fondly at Tinasha's proud smile.

Thus, a new story of two rulers unfolds—a tale of the year before their fates changed forever.

Afterword

To readers old and new, thank you for picking up *Unnamed Memory*, Vol. 4. My name is Kuji Furumiya.

This story is the published book form of a web novel I posted on my personal website in 2008. When I wrote it, novel posting sites did not exist yet, so I slowly and gradually assembled roughly one million characters' worth of text and posted it all up at once on a corner of the Internet… I'm getting déjà vu flashing back to the first afterword. Rest assured, I won't repeat any previous afterword content. This volume marks the start of the story's second half.

The king and the witch's year together has ended, and a new story begins here.

We've started fresh from a clean slate, but at the same time, you should recognize many familiar faces from Volumes 2–3, albeit changed slightly here and there. Of course, Tuldarr is alive and well this time around. Same goes for the gang of thieves that a curse song should have eradicated. The equestrian tribe that previously played a central role has been assimilated and turned to agriculture, while the religious cult that was ruined by the creation of the magical lakes has now infiltrated the heart of a certain country.

All the previous books' events are memories that only you readers possess—aside from a few shady key characters. I hope you'll enjoy how characters shift around unawares. *Unnamed Memory*, Vol. 4 tells of a cursed king and the mysterious mage woman who's devoted to him. I do hope you'll stick with me until the end of their year together all over again, as well as for the final reveal of all the mysteries.

And now it's time for me to give my gratitude to some people yet again!

Thank you so very much to the editors who are always, always, always supporting me! I'm sorry for tinkering with the manuscript up until the last second every single time! It's all thanks to you that Tinasha's personality keeps getting more hopeless in a cute way. Thank you so much!

My heartfelt appreciation to chibi, who's in charge of character design and illustrations! It's amazing how the same character can give off such a

different impression. And we can’t forget how many adorable illustrations you’ve drawn of Tinasha in various outfits. So cute! So gorgeous!

I’d also like to thank Tappei Nagatsuki, who has written warm words of endorsement for this volume like he did the last one! The book was even recommended in the *Kono Light Novel ga Sugoi! 2020* guide. The review was so cool… Thank you!

Finally, to everyone who read this book, thank you so very much. Thanks to you, *Unnamed Memory* ranked number one in the large-format paperback category of *Kono Light Novel ga Sugoi! 2020*. That was only possible because of your love and support for the series. I will do my best to repay your patronage by giving everything I have to the three volumes of Act Two.

We’ll meet again somewhere in an unnamed history. Thank you so much!

Kuji Furumiya

Extra

“Can’t you wear something different for once?” Oscar asked Tinasha. The pair were in the king’s study in Farsas.

She turned her attention from the tea she was brewing, puzzled. “Wear something different…? Do you mean a mage’s robe with a different effect?”

“No.”

Unable to get on the same page, they both frowned. A strange silence fell over the study.

Oscar gazed at this woman from another country. She was over four hundred years old, though she had spent most of that asleep and outwardly appeared only slightly younger than he was. Glimmers of a naïveté—for she was often too ignorant of the ways of the world—peeked out from her beautiful countenance. That radiance made her perfect for dressing up, yet she only donned a mage’s robe.

As Tinasha poured a cup of light-crimson tea, she grumbled, “A mage’s robe is very convenient. Magic sprays up during spells and charms, doesn’t it? This garment can repel the tiniest of those magic splashes.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Although they’re very hard to make, Tuldarr Castle undoubtedly has many.”

“Oh, could I perhaps buy a few?”

“Are you thinking of wearing a mage’s robe?”

“No.”

The two really were practically having different conversations. Oscar could probably just come out and say *I want to dress you up in all kinds of outfits*, but he had a feeling that if he didn’t express it quite right, Tinasha would only respond *Fine, if you marry me.*

Had she been privy to his thoughts, she might simply yell *I wouldn’t say that! Fix your impression of me, already!* Still, Oscar thought it prudent to stay quiet.

He had only wanted a distraction from his piles and piles of work. As he swallowed his dejection, Tinasha placed a cup of tea in front of him.

“You know, since I’m in Farsas, it might be nice to change my clothes up a little. From time to time.”

“If you need new garments, I’ll get you some.”

“I can do that much myself. I’m not a child,” she retorted. Oscar went silent at her instant rejection. Even if it wasn’t one of his choosing, he would get to see her in a different outfit, in time.

Entirely unaware of Oscar’s musings, Tinasha left the room deep in thought…and returned several hours later in new attire. She wore a plain white short-sleeved dress with a high hemline, exactly the sort that children in the castle city wore in summer.

Oscar sighed. “You really are a disappointment as a woman.”

“What? Why? Don’t I look like I belong in Farsas?”

“Just do whatever you want. It’s entertaining.”

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